

**“This is an acknowledgement that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup?”: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* in light of Goffman’s Dramaturgy**

**Daniela Sousa Medeiros**

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*To all those who resist and rebel,*

*“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches.”*

(Season 1, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”, 00:51:10)

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation analyzes Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a novel set in a theocratic patriarchal society which employs an omnipresent and dissimulated surveillance of its citizens, through the Dramaturgical theory of social interaction formulated by the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, as presented in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. By exploring how the dystopian dictatorial regime of Gilead forces its citizens into submitting to a role imposed by those in power, it stands out that most individuals will perform their assigned role only as faithfully as the powerful audience they are in front of at that specific moment requires it to be. Most characters are cynical about their public performances and try to covertly go against what is expected of them by whatever means they can, avoiding being caught subverting those expectations and suffering the consequences their disobedience would bring. The most effective form of defiance proves to be enacted through “team-performances”, a term devised by Goffman which designates the cooperation between two or more people invested in keeping a performance common to all involved, particularly when that performance has some sort of secret that must be kept from general knowledge. It is by apparently adapting herself to what Gilead expects of her and rebelling silently that Offred, the protagonist, manages to survive and escape her oppressors, unlike other characters who openly revolt against the regime, proving how important it is to perform a role convincingly any society.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Dramaturgy, Resistance, Margaret Atwood, Erving Goffman, Dystopia

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**RESUMO**

Esta dissertação analisa a obra *The Handmaid’s Tale*, de Margaret Atwood, através da teoria da Dramaturgia estabelecida pelo sociólogo Canadano-Americano Erving Goffman na sua obra *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, tendo em conta que este romance tem como plano de fundo uma sociedade teocrática patriarcal que põe em ação uma vigilância onnipresente e dissimulada dos seus cidadãos. Ao explorar a forma como a ditadura distópica de Gilead força os seus cidadãos a submeterem-se a um papel social imposto por aqueles que detêm o poder, é possível concluir que a maioria dos indivíduos representa e leva a cabo o papel social que lhe foi atribuído apenas tão fielmente quanto é esperado pelos espectadores em frente dos quais se encontra num determinado momento. A maioria das personagens representa o seu papel social de forma cínica quando está em público e, secretamente, tenta subverter o que o regime espera dele de forma dissimulada, evitando sofrer as consequências que a sua desobediência traria. A forma mais eficaz de oposição é posta em prática através de “team-performances”, um termo formulado por Goffman para designar a cooperação entre duas ou mais pessoas que partilham uma representação, principalmente se essa representação tem por base um segredo que não deve ser de conhecimento geral, apenas partilhado por quem a constitui. Em vez de seguir o exemplo de outras personagens que mostram de forma aberta a sua oposição contra Gilead, a protagonista, Offred, consegue sobreviver e escapar ao adaptar-se, pelo menos aparentemente, ao que a sociedade espera dela e ao rebelar-se apenas de forma silenciosa, provando o quão importante é representar um papel social de forma convincente em qualquer sociedade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Dramaturgy, Resistance, Margaret Atwood, Erving Goffman, Dystopia

## INDEX

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : From page to screen.....	9
1.2. Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy.....	14
2. <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> in light of Goffman's Dramaturgy.....	17
2.1. Gender and social roles in Gilead.....	18
2.2. Offred.....	33
2.3. "Team-performances" in Gilead.....	42
2.3.1. The Handmaids.....	43
2.3.2. Offred's "team-performances".....	59
2.3.2.1. The Commander.....	59
2.3.2.2. The Wife.....	73
2.3.2.3. The best friend .....	78
2.3.2.4. The fellow Handmaid.....	83
2.3.2.5. The driver.....	89
3. Conclusion.....	94
4. Works Cited.....	107

“This is an acknowledgement that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup?”:

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All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts . . .

Shakespeare II.vii:140-143

## 1. Introduction

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), by Margaret Atwood, tells the story of a patriarchal misogynistic dystopia that speculates how life in the United States of America would be if it ever fell into a totalitarian dictatorship. Inspired by the seventeenth century’s theocratic Puritan society, the advances of the conservative Republican Party in the nineteen-eighties and the rise of dystopian fiction between the nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-fifties, Atwood presents a scenario where the ultraconservative far-right takes over the United States’ government, establishing an authoritarian regime that suspends all constitutional rights, activates measures of racial cleansing, torture, public executions of homosexuals and dissidents, and limits women to their reproductive function. Atwood’s novel is set in Gilead, a racist oppressing society established after a military *coup d’état* by a group called “Sons of Jacob” killed the President of the United States and took over the government. This new dictatorship – prompted by a childbirth crisis, caused by environmental contamination, legal abortions, the expansion of birth control methods, and a syphilis and AIDS epidemic – turns most men into all-powerful figures, the “Commanders”, and



completely silences most of the women, oppressing and reducing them to a specific social role. This oppression is particularly vicious to the women known as Handmaids, whose role implies being assigned to a Commander with whom they must forcefully have sexual intercourse until she becomes pregnant and bears his family a healthy child.

When it was first published, *The Handmaid's Tale* was praised as original, diverging even from the renowned dystopias which Margaret Atwood herself admits being inspired by. Its uniqueness was mainly due to the fact that it is narrated by a female character, the protagonist Offred, a Handmaid. Most well-known dystopias, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* are all told from a man's point of view, which means that the terrifying effects of living in a dystopian society were never seen and recounted through the eyes of a woman. As Howells points out,

[Atwood's] choice of a female narrator turns the traditionally masculine dystopian genre upside down, so that instead of Orwell's analysis of the public policies and institutions of state oppression, Atwood gives us a dissident account by a Handmaid who has been relegated to the margins of political power . . . allowing Atwood to reclaim a feminine space of personal emotions and individual identity (164).

Consequently, besides being labeled as speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been defined as a feminist dystopia.<sup>1</sup> However, Margaret Atwood has declared that her novel is an "ustopia"

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<sup>1</sup> Although feminism is widely associated to Margaret Atwood's work by critics and readers, the author has always denied writing with that intention. For example, Fiona Tolan explores this connection between Atwood's novels and

instead, a term which was coined by Atwood herself, combining the words “utopia” and “dystopia” in a single term, because it is impossible to dissociate one reality from the other. In *Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Utopia—The Handmaid’s Tale and the MaddAddam Trilogy*, Atwood argues that every utopia has a dystopian side to it and, in turn, in every dystopia there is a dissimulated utopia – putting it simply, one cannot exist without the other. This reasoning makes even more sense when Atwood uses New England’s seventeenth-century Puritan society, which was intended as a utopia, as a blueprint for Gilead’s dystopian fundamentalist theocracy, especially when it comes to the misuse and conscious misinterpretation of religion and the consequences it leads to, since one of the Puritans’ first enterprises was building a prison and a scaffold to execute those whom they considered wrongdoers and a threat to their Puritan utopia.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, another characteristic that sets *The Handmaid’s Tale* apart from other dystopias is the fact that Atwood refused to put into it anything completely out of her imagination; instead, everything she uses in the book – from the technology to the disturbing social politics – is based on real-life events that have happened somewhere in the world at a certain time. While writing her novel, Atwood collected newspaper clippings of the most distressing news from all around the world, taking those situations and mirroring them in Gilead. During her research for the article “Margaret Atwood, the Prophet of Dystopia”, Rebecca Mead (2017) had the chance to look at the author’s collection and reveals some of what she saw:

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feminism in *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007), where she dedicates a specific chapter to *The Handmaid’s Tale* – “*The Handmaid’s Tale*: Second-Wave Feminism as Anti-Utopia” (144).

<sup>2</sup> Further information on the subject of crime and punishment during 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritanism can be found in detail in Scott D. Seay’s *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth: Capital Crime, Execution Preaching, and Theology in Early New England* (2009).

There were stories of abortion and contraception being outlawed in Romania, and reports from Canada lamenting its falling birth rate, and articles from the U.S. about Republican attempts to withhold federal funding from clinics that provided abortion services. There were reports about the threat to privacy posed by debit cards, which were a novelty at the time, and accounts of U.S. congressional hearings devoted to the regulation of toxic industrial emissions, in the wake of the deadly gas leak in Bhopal, India. An Associated Press item reported on a Catholic congregation in New Jersey being taken over by a fundamentalist sect in which wives were called “handmaidens”—a word that Atwood had underlined.

These are but a few examples of what inspired the world of Gilead, and many others have been pointed out over the years by Margaret Atwood herself.<sup>3</sup> In fact, these connections to the real world are the reason behind Atwood’s refusal to let *The Handmaid’s Tale* fall into the literary category of science fiction, describing it as speculative fiction instead.<sup>4</sup> In the words of the author: “Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen” (Atwood qtd. in Armstrong).

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<sup>3</sup> In the article “Why *The Handmaid’s Tale* is so relevant today” (2018), Jennifer Keishin Armstrong presents further information on real-life events that inspired *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as the conservatism brought by the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the US, the rise of televangelism, the apartheid in South Africa and the Argentinian children who were stolen from their parents and given to selected leaders in 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding speculative fiction, in “*Speculated Communities*”: *The Contemporary Canadian Speculative Fictions of Margaret Atwood, Nalo Hopkinson, and Larissa Lai* (2012, 1-27) Laura Hildebrand conveys the importance of this literary genre, especially due to the fact that its imagined communities serve as a reflection of the present and/or a warning to the future.

The theme for this dissertation was chosen based on the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a timeless warning to the world about the consequences inherent to the abuse of power among the genders and, now more than ever, it seems that Offred's story has become a sort of weapon in the continuous fight against gender prejudices, sexism and misogyny. In truth, even though Atwood's novel has been relevant since its publication in 1985, it cannot be denied that the 2017 television series, being a tremendous success, brought *The Handmaid's Tale* to the imaginary of a whole new audience, to a whole new generation even, introducing the world of Gilead to a wider public, some of which had never even heard of it before. Consequently, with the success of the television series came the renewed interest towards the original novel – people who loved the series wanted to read the book that inspired it and proof of this is the fact that *Amazon* revealed that *The Handmaid's Tale* was the most-read book of 2017, the same year as the series' premiere (Trombetta). Recently, its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), was published and was an immediate success. Having said that, choosing *The Handmaid's Tale* as a subject for this dissertation comes from a deep personal interest in its strong themes, which seem to be as relevant today as they were when Margaret Atwood sat down to write her novel, as if society has been stuck in a constant cycle of illusory progress – decades pass, and things look as if they are evolving but, in the end, the world is still having the same debates, fighting the same stereotypes and prejudices, marching to oppose troubling ideologies and, more importantly, still not completely certain that Margaret Atwood's terrifying speculation is as impossible to come true as it might seem.

Having achieved the status of a literary classic, in its thirty-four years of existence, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been subject to countless studies, debates and analysis and, undoubtedly, will continue to be so. Being such a complex novel, there are countless possible approaches to the many themes inherent to Offred's story. Taking into consideration what has been done in the past,

it seems that most studies on *The Handmaid's Tale* focus on a specific group of themes, namely: the negative manipulation of language by those in power; the constant surveillance in Gilead; the abuse of the female body as a symbol of the oppressive patriarchy; the female attempts at resistance against the regime, and, perhaps the subject which sparks the most controversy among critics and academics, the debate over whether Offred fails as a heroine or not.

The way language is used, or rather, misused in Gilead has been explored by several academics, each of them offering a different point of view. In *The Role of Language in constructing Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, Tamra Elizabeth DiBenedetto, focuses on how language is manipulated and restricted in Gilead, resulting in what she calls “meaning-making” (10). According to DiBenedetto, Atwood’s novel shows a distinct difference between female communication, which serves to build intimacy and form a community, and male discourse, which serves to maintain power. Complementary to DiBenedetto’s work is Julia Keers’ *Words as Weapons: An Analysis of the Discursive Practices of Power and Resistance Constituted Through Speech Acts in the Dystopian Novels 1984 and The Handmaid's Tale*, which brings to light how the totalitarian regime uses language to turn its citizens into “passive puppets” (12). Nevertheless, Keers also argues that Offred is able to reclaim language and use it as a component of performativity, in order to subvert the dictatorship. Indeed, as an oppressed woman, Offred organises rebellion through a secret network of women that uses its own symbolical language and power.

On the subject of surveillance, Camilla Irene Fauskanger Davidsen analyses Gilead’s mechanism of power and control in *The Power of the Gaze: Seeing and Being Seen in “Nineteen Eighty-Four” and “The Handmaid's Tale”*. Using Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, Davidsen argues that the constant surveillance in Gilead affects the identity formation of its denizens while,

at the same time, empowering and disempowering them. This constant state of controlling observation can easily be linked to the idea that Atwood's dystopia is undoubtedly modelled after the twentieth-century dictatorships. For example, in *O feminino distópico: as vozes de Brave New World e de The Handmaid's Tale*, Maria Gonçalves explores how Huxley's and Atwood's novels criticize the patriarchal dictatorships, taking into consideration Bordieu's symbolic violence and the fact that both novels are strongly influenced by Stalinism's pro-natalist policies and rigid social roles; while, in her "'From a Distance It Looks Like Peace': Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", Angela Laflen analyses the similarities between Gilead's regime and Hitler's Third Reich, especially when it comes to how visual culture is used to manipulate people into accepting an oppressive ideology and indoctrinating them into submission.

When it comes to the observation of how women are represented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, most critics seem to focus on how the female body is used as a tool for the patriarchal regime, considering not only the fact that Handmaids are reduced to being breeders but also Gilead's strict hierarchy which separates and makes them see one another as enemies. In *Enforcing Patriarchal Values: A socialist feminist analysis of the characters of Offred and Serena Joy in Margaret Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale*, Andrea Jonsson explores, from a socialist feminist point of view, how women are divided in Atwood's novel, taking particular interest in what separates Offred and Serena Joy, what they represent in the patriarchal dictatorship and how the colours (red and blue) associated with each of them are deeply symbolic. Directly connected to this division among women, is the notion that their prescribed costumes, besides deepening the differences between them, oppress their bodies and, ultimately, their selves.

Finally, it seems that the most debated question among those who analyse Atwood's novel is whether Offred, as a dystopian heroine, can actually be considered heroic. In "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*", Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson explore Offred's passiveness throughout the novel. They argue that Offred struggles to maintain her identity in a regime that wants her to forget her past completely while, at the same time, trying to oppose her oppressors in subtle, undetected ways – which allow her survival and show that she is not totally under Gilead's control but, in their opinion, are ultimately ineffective. Stillman and Johnson's criticism towards Offred is one of the harshest, but other academics agree with them, namely Asami Nakamura, in "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Multidimensional Critique of Rebellion"; Fredrik Pettersson in *Discourse and Oppression in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, and Nuha S. Alotaibi in "Distorted Shadows: Power and Subjugated Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*". On the other hand, there are authors who defend Offred's behaviour, claiming she is successfully heroic through her silent rebellion. For example, in *Nonviolent resistance through counter-narrative in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Lai's Salt Fish Girl*, Melodie Roschman openly disagrees with Stillman and Johnson's criticism towards Offred, defending that the protagonist manages to resist what Roschman calls a "control dystopia" (8) by keeping her memory, by telling her story, and by using her imagination. Such non-neutral reactions from critics illustrates the strong (positive and negative) reactions the politically and ideologically engaged novel elicits from readers.

Taking into consideration what has already been written, the ultimate goal of this dissertation is to try to understand how the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, both in the novel as well as in the series, but especially in the former, manage to survive in Gilead by adapting

themselves to the roles that are forced upon them by the regime.<sup>5</sup> To do that, Erving Goffman's theatrical theory of social interaction will be used to analyse the text, in order to understand how the characters, especially Offred and the people she interacts with, change and present themselves before others when confronted by different social scenarios throughout the story. Using the Canadian-American sociologist's theory, the concepts inherent to his Dramaturgy will be applied to the society created by Margaret Atwood with the intention of proving how important the performances enacted by the characters in the different situations they find themselves in are in terms of their survival, especially considering the fact that Gilead is a society that intends to control their every action and supervise how faithfully the roles attributed are being performed. Through Goffman's theory, it will be explored how the characters adapt their "selves" to their social roles, how they wear a "mask", and how they manage to act against the totalitarian regime through subtle divergent behaviour without losing 'face' or 'mask'. In order to do that, it is important to delve into the historical context in which *The Handmaid's Tale* came into the world, in 1985, and understand how Atwood's novel made its way to the television screen, in 2017, taking into special consideration how similar the political background seems to be on both circumstances.

### 1.1 *The Handmaid's Tale*: From page to screen

When Margaret Atwood set out to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, in 1984, the political state of the world was a source of inspiration. The first pages of the novel, which was first named *Offred*, were written while the author was living in West Berlin, five years before the Wall which divided

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<sup>5</sup> Although both the novel and the television series will be considered in this dissertation, the primordial subject is the literary source and, unless the series is specifically mentioned, it should be assumed that what is being discussed is within the book's context.



the German city came down. If that alone was not enough to prove how politically fueled the creation of *The Handmaid's Tale* was, it is also important to point out that Margaret Atwood traveled to several countries behind the Iron Curtain and that made her experience firsthand how people managed their social encounters – in her own words: “I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing” (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”).

After being adapted for the big screen, and having been made into an opera and even a ballet, Atwood’s novel finally made its way into the small screen in 2017. Having said that, in 2019, *The Handmaid's Tale*’s popularity shows no signs of slowing down – the original story became a graphic novel in March, season three of the television series premiered in June, season four has already been confirmed, and Margaret Atwood surprised her readers by announcing, and publishing on September 2019, the long-awaited sequel to Offred’s story, *The Testaments*. Indeed, when the first season premiered, the fact that it used the novel’s plot in its entirety suggested it would not be extended to a second season. However, due to its unquestionable global success and the fact it became one of the most critically acclaimed television series ever, it was soon confirmed that the series would expand beyond the novel and go on to have a second, third and fourth season. Although there are those who would prefer to have it end where the original material ended, for fear of an adaptation without an actual source to cling to, the entertainment industry is a potency which generates unimaginable amounts of monetary income and regulates itself on profit – that means that when it finds something as profitable as *The Handmaid's Tale*’s adaptation, it is

considered a “mine gold” to all those involved and they will probably try to expand it as far as it can go.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, when the television series first premiered, in 2017, the state of the world was curiously similar to what it was in 1984. Indeed, the *Hulu* series appeared during a time of significant political tension, especially due to the alarming advances of extreme far-right movements through the entire world and, perhaps more importantly, due to Donald Trump’s surprising rise to the presidency of the United States (US). The fact that Donald Trump became president of the US on the twentieth of January of 2017 had direct consequences on how the series was received by audiences, not only in the US, but all around the world. As Matthew d’Ancona points out: “*The Handmaid’s Tale* was ostensibly televisual fiction. Yet in its uncompromising exploration of fear and power and its abuse, it also captured the lightning of the moment in a bottle of dystopian genius. It was nothing short of mesmerizing” (d’Ancona). Moreover, even the cast and crew of the series have repeatedly told the press that this shift in the North-American politics had an undeniable impact on how everyone involved in making the series felt towards their job.

Definitely worthy of mention is also the fact that just a day after Trump became the forty-fifth President of the US, the Women’s March took over the streets of Washington to protest, most of all, Trump’s political views towards women’s rights. Among the thousands of protesters, it was impossible to miss the blood-red dresses of people wearing the Handmaids’ costumes and the numerous signs related to Margaret Atwood and her novel being held up as an outcry of dissent. This not only proves that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a timeless novel, but also that the television adaptation could not have been more timely since the world was already making connections

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<sup>6</sup> This is what Simone Murray designates as the “adaptation industry” and further information on this matter can be found in her essay “The Business of Adaptation: Reading the Market” (122-141).

between recent events and Atwood's distressing conjecture. As Rebecca Mead concludes in "Margaret Atwood, the Prophet of Dystopia": "The timing could not be more fortuitous, though many people may wish that it were less so. In a photograph taken the day after the Inauguration, at the Women's March on Washington, a protester held a sign bearing a slogan that spoke to the moment: 'MAKE MARGARET ATWOOD FICTION AGAIN.'".

Although the television adaptation mostly follows the book faithfully, there are some obvious differences between it and the source. Curiously, the changes created in the series were strategically done to make the setting seem even more current, to reflect today's reality with precise exactness. According to Julie Sanders, this is not an uncommon situation, as adapting a novel to the screen by making it resemble a time more recognizable to the audience is a commonly used strategy and, even though Sanders is specifically commenting on film adaptations, the same can be applied to television:

On the surface, all screen versions of novels are transpositions in the sense that they take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audiences by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process (here novel into film). But many adaptations, of novels and other generic forms, contain further layers of transposition, relocating their source texts not just generically, but in cultural, geographical and temporal terms (20).

That being said, the changes made to *Offred*'s story seem much more plausible and terrifying to the spectators, because it shows how easily the society they are living in at that exact moment could turn into Gilead. Besides some real-life cultural references, such as *Tinder* and *Uber*, one of

the most eye-catching alterations can be recognized in the fact that while there are no people of colour in the novel's Gilead, the television series has a considerably diverse cast. Indeed, in Atwood's novel, Gilead's ideology stands for white supremacy and, consequently, all people of colour, including African-Americans and Jews were either killed or sent to the Colonies. Obviously, an adaptation set in today's reality could hardly be made without including people of colour, especially considering how important representation in media is nowadays. Dorothy E. Roberts actually takes this further, offering another point of view to explain this change, arguing that "A reproductive dystopia for the twenty-first century could no longer exclude women of color from the market for high-tech reprogenetics. Rather, it would take place in a society in which racial and economic divisions are reinforced by the genetic testing extended to them" (184). Whatever the case, the fact remains that by being set in the US, the series' cast was chosen in a way that accurately mirrors the country's population, which is constituted by people of all colours and ethnicities.

In addition to what has been mentioned, another important difference between the novel and the television series can be found in the protagonist herself. From episode one, those who have read the novel will notice that the televised version of Offred is a much more openly rebellious character than the original Offred, who is silently subversive. Unlike the novel's Offred, the protagonist on the screen comes off as an unquestionable feminist heroine who attends protests and is active in the fight against her oppressors, something which is arguably another strategic change with the intention of making the protagonist a resounding and relatable character for today's audience – a woman who fights and survives in a world that tries to oppress and diminish her.

## 1.2 Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published in 1956, Erving Goffman established a social theory that connects social interaction to theatrical performances. This theory transports all the elements and terminology inherent to theatre and applies them to face-to-face interaction between individuals, creating a dramaturgical model of social life. To put it simply, Goffman's theory argues that when an individual finds himself upon a social interaction, he presents himself in a way that allows him to control, or at least try to control, the impression others will have of him; to achieve that, he becomes an actor, portraying a role on a stage, in front of an audience. According to Goffman, "the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (*Presentation* 2-3). To successfully adapt to what is required of him in a certain face-to-face interaction, the individual must put on a "mask" that allows him to behave exactly like it is expected of him in that context. In the event of accidentally dropping this "mask", the individual will find himself discredited by his audience, which is why all manner of dissonant actions, those which do not correspond to the role he is playing at the moment, must be repressed and kept for "backstage", the only place where "the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (*Presentation* 69).

In order to perform correctly, the individual must always take into consideration, not only his audience but his surroundings as well. This is what Goffman designates as the "front", which includes the "setting" and the "personal front". On the one hand, the "setting" is, usually, a fixed aspect of the performance, since it includes "furniture, décor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played

out before, within, or upon it” (*Presentation* 13), just like the stage set in a theatrical play. On the other hand, the “personal front” is described by the sociologist as something which is associated with the individual himself and identifies him, no matter the “setting” he is in – things like “insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like” (*Presentation* 14-15). As Goffman explains: “If we take the term ‘setting’ to refer to the scenic parts of expressive equipment, we may take the term ‘personal front’ to refer to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes”. However, the sociologist recognizes that even if these elements should be relatively fixed, that is not always a possibility and, in reality, they end up being “relatively mobile or transitory . . . and can vary during a performance from one moment to the next” (*Presentation* 15), depending on how important it is for the individual to follow the guidelines of the role required of him in a certain situation – whether his audience allows room for error or a chance for the individual to be more or less himself is an important factor to consider while performing.

To prevent losing his “mask” and revealing his true self, the individual must learn to adapt to every circumstance he might find himself in. Nevertheless, sometimes there are unavoidable unintentional slipups, especially when the individual is surprised by a situation he did not prepare for. These involuntary actions are what Goffman calls “unmeant gestures” – “Unmeant gestures, inopportune intrusions, and faux pas are sources of embarrassment and dissonance which are typically unintended by the- person who is responsible for making them and which would be avoided were the individual to know in advance the consequences of his activity” (*Presentation* 133). One of the most important ideas established by the Canadian-American sociologist is the

concept of “team-performances” or “dramaturgical co-operation” (*Presentation* 51), which will be essential to the analysis this dissertation aims to undertake. These “team-performances”, exactly as the name itself suggests, occur when two or more individuals perform together, trusting each other as “accomplices” to keep an appearance before an audience who already has predetermined expectations of what their performance should be like (Goffman, *Presentation* 52). Often, these “team-performances” are linked to “staging cues”, which are signals used to initiate the performance and help keep the “front”. Obviously, in order to work properly, these cues should only be recognizable to those involved in the performance and completely innocuous to their audience. Goffman gives great importance to these “staging cues” as they help the “team-mates” keep the secrecy of their shared dissident behaviour without putting their performance at risk. As the sociologist explains: “One important kind of team collusion is found in the system of secret signals through which performers can surreptitiously receive or transmit pertinent information, requests for assistance, and other matters of a kind relevant to the successful presentation of a performance” (*Presentation* 113).

The collusions mentioned above are often, although not always, established between people who share some sort of secret – something which goes against the rules dictated for their roles and, if made public, would have serious consequences for the individuals involved. This leads to the idea of “discrepant roles”. These “discrepant roles” are applied to the individuals who do not fully commit to their role, either because it has been forced upon them or because they simply do not believe in it. When this happens, the individual performs his role as a “burden” and it becomes a deceitful performance. In that case, there is a big chance that the individual will take on a secondary role, a covert role, which he keeps exclusively to himself or shares only with those whom he trusts with that knowledge, possibly those with whom he shares a “dark”, a “strategic”

or an “inside” secret. According to the sociologist, “dark” secrets are those that must stay hidden and never “openly admitted”; “strategic” secrets must be concealed from the audience “in order to prevent them from adapting effectively to the state of affairs”; and “inside” secrets are “ones whose possession marks an individual as being a member of a group and helps the group feel separate and different from those individuals who are not ‘in the know’” (Goffman, *Presentation* 87-88). These three types of secrets defined by Goffman are particularly important when paired to “team-performances”, as most of these are established upon some sort of information which is only known to those who compose said ‘team’ whose members must make sure their secrets remain unknown to their audience, especially if that audience has the power to punish them for any sort of secret which goes against what is expected of the performers.

All the concepts presented will be of the utmost importance to the analysis that will be developed throughout this dissertation, which has the goal of connecting Goffman’s Dramaturgy to Margaret Atwood’s characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, whose lives and social encounters are permanently under the weight of performing, in the strictest way possible, a role which has been forced upon them. Not only is it important to consider the social roles of these characters, but also how those who are not sincerely invested in their performance try to subvert those roles, something which most of them do by associating themselves with someone with whom they share some sort of secret and/or shared belief.

## 2. *The Handmaid’s Tale* in light of Goffman’s Dramaturgy

Although Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgy is the chosen theory for this study, the idea that social interactions can be compared to theatrical performances cannot be exclusively associated



with the Canadian-American sociologist, as he is not the first theorist to acknowledge the similarities between social life and the dramatic arts. In fact, even Plato, in Ancient Greece, made this connection – “in his dialogue *Philebos* Plato describes the earthly, mortal journey as a ‘tragedy and comedy of human life’” (Võsu 135); and Shakespeare, for example, is well-known for his metaphors involving the lives of men and the dramas of theatre. However, most of the preceding theories on this subject have a different approach towards what motivates people’s actions and their behavioral changes in social contexts, as they generally point to religion as the factor which controls people’s behaviour. As Võsu explains, “in these earlier texts, the idea of the world as a theatre stage and humans as characters in a play written by God(s) usually refers to the belief that humans cannot create and stage their lives only by themselves, and that their choices in roles to play may not be voluntary, but rather provided to them by the (godlike) stage director” (135).

Taking this into consideration, it can be said that, in Gilead, this “godlike” figure mentioned by Võsu takes the shape of those in power, since they are the ones who decide people’s roles, dictate how those roles must be performed, and supervise how faithful the performances are. Since Erving Goffman’s theory is so focused on social roles and how the individual must adapt to them, it is relatively easy to link his concepts to Atwood’s Gilead, a society where people are literally reduced to a forcefully imposed social role and their lives depend on how well they perform it.

## 2.1. Gender and social roles in Gilead

In any society, be it a democracy or a dictatorship, there is an established social structure that serves as a fundamental guideline to all the individuals who are a part of that society which helps them find their place in it. However, a social structure in a democracy and a social structure

in a dictatorship are not exactly similar. The obvious difference between those two types of societies is the lack of free will that is extinguished in any sort of totalitarian regime, meaning that its social structure is created by those who impose their rule upon the society – the elite – creating social categories and placing individuals in them, without so much consulting the citizens or taking into account their abilities and socio-economic status. Consequently, while a democracy allows its citizens some social mobility – either to rise in status or the reverse, depending on how well they do in life – the same cannot be said for a fixed social structure, like the one that organizes Gileadean society.

As a patriarchal dictatorship, Gilead's society is specifically designed to demonstrate that not all citizens are equal and, more importantly, to set apart men, the all-powerful, and women, the powerless. In fact, it is important to understand that the power structure in Gilead is dictated by a strict social hierarchy, one which is defined by every individual's social role. Besides the fact that it allows barely any upward mobility, the only ones with the slightest chance of moving up in society are the men. As Anette Kirkvik points out, "there is a clear distinction and power imbalance between 'male' and 'female'" (12). Actually, it is possible to make a distinction between a male and a female hierarchy, although even the women at the top of the female hierarchy are not equal to the men at the top of the male hierarchy. Being a military dictatorship, Gilead divides the men according to the military ranks of the Sons of Jacob: Commanders of the Faithful, Angels, Guardians, and the Eyes. The Commanders are the ruling class, the most powerful individuals in Gilead, thus the only ones with the right to have Handmaids at their service. The Angels are soldiers who fight Gilead's wars and secure its borders. The Guardians are lower-ranking soldiers who patrol the streets. Unlike the aforementioned, the Eyes are unidentified men who constitute Gilead's secret police – they can be anyone, which makes everyone suspicious of everyone.

The undeniable discrepancy between men and women shows how intent Gilead is on reducing women to their gender, expecting them to live up to old-fashioned and misogynistic stereotypes associated with the female sex. Considering this reduction of women to their attributed powerless roles, Kirkiv argues that “Gilead preaches both gender and sexuality essentialism by creating various categories for women that all relate to servitude, housework, and/or men (Marthas, Wives, Handmaids), invoking the associations to roles being played, of simply going through the necessary motions” (12). The fact that women’s roles in Gilead are defined and restricted by their physiology goes against everything Judith Butler has theorized on the subject of gender. Widely known for her work on gender performativity, which is widely inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Butler argues that gender is not something automatically determined by the sexual organ which the individual is born with, but something the individual learns, internalizes and acts upon throughout his life, just like a performance – “Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women’s freedom, not a defining and limiting essence” (Butler 12). That being said, through an essentialist ideology, Gilead represents the direct opposite of what Butler and de Beauvoir advocate, as the patriarchal theocracy reduces women to their female bodies’ faculties and thus they have no choice but to identify and perform as women.

The women of Gilead are divided into seven groups: Wives, Daughters, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, and Unwomen. The terms used to differentiate the groups are literal designators of what the women in each of them are expected to do in Gilead, their prescribed social role. At the very top of the female hierarchy are the Wives, who are granted this position just for being married to the Commanders – they are reduced to obedient housewives with not much to do besides knitting, gardening and visiting other Wives. The Daughters, as the name explicitly suggests, are the female children of the Commanders who, as soon as they are of age, are handed

in marriage to Angels. The Aunts are the only women in Gilead who are given the slightest bit of power, as their duty to society is to educate and indoctrinate the Handmaids in the Red Center, making them forget who they used to be in the past and prepare them for their new role as child-bearers for those in power – the Aunt with the most protagonism in the novel is Aunt Lydia, who seems to be the figurehead of the Aunts. The Econowives are women married to men of lower positions, who must serve however they can – some of them are known as Marthas, women who serve in the Commanders' houses as housekeepers, with no compensation for their work. And, finally, the Unwomen aggregate all the women who are infertile, handicapped in any way, too old or too rebellious – not being able to serve Gilead in any fruitful manner, they are sent to the Colonies to clean toxic waste until they die.

Another way Gilead manages to divide its citizens is through the enforcement of uniforms, with different styles and colors for each social class that composes the Gileadean society. Considering Goffman's theory, these uniforms are what the sociologist describes as "status symbols" (*Presentation*, 24) which are mechanisms that help build and maintain the "personal front", meaning "the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes" (*Presentation* 14). This division through clothing is, without a doubt, most noticeable among the different groups of women, accentuating the fact that they are not at all equal. Actually, Margaret Atwood is known for her peculiar use of colour symbolism in her novels, especially because she does not use colours in the traditional sense; sometimes the author makes colours mean the opposite of what the audience expects them to signify and, other times, she devises her own significance to certain colours. Shannon Martin is one of the scholars who explores this subversion of colour symbolism by Atwood:

Atwood throws into question conventional color meaning in a number of ways. First, she forces many colors to represent the opposite of their usual association. She further complicates this use of color by allowing a number of colors simultaneously to represent two opposing ideas. Also, she often chooses to focus on the more negative connotations of colors. Finally, she many times corrupts the traditional meanings of colors by assigning them her own unique associations (1-2).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, colours are of the utmost importance, as they give deeper meaning to the roles each woman must perform in Gilead, influencing not only their performances but also their mental state. Keeping in mind the aforementioned categories of Gileadean women, it is important to refer which colours belong to whom. Putting it simply: the Wives wear blue, the Daughters wear white, the Aunts wear brown, the Handmaids wear red, the Marthas wear green, the Econowives wear a multicolored dress, and the Unwomen wear gray. Being a patriarchal society that upholds conservative values, it comes as no surprise that all women have to wear some sort of dress or skirt – it is unthinkable to have a woman wearing pants or any sort of clothing associated to men's attire. In this case, the dresses and skirts are another device of Gileadean patriarchal tyranny, as it further accentuates their enclosure and purposely hinders their movement. Indeed, in *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu confirms this idea of using clothing as a mechanism to assert female oppression:

As if femininity were measured by the art of 'shrinking' . . . women are held in a kind of *invisible enclosure* (of which the veil is only the visible manifestation) circumscribing the space allowed for the movements and postures of their bodies (whereas men occupy more

space, especially in public places). This symbolic *confinement* is secured practically by their clothing which (as was even more visible in former times) has the effect not only of masking the body but of continuously calling it to order (the skirt fulfils a function entirely analogous to that of the priest's cassock) without ever needing to prescribe or proscribe anything explicitly . . . either because it constrains movement in various ways, like high heels or the bag which constantly encumbers the hands, and above all the skirt which prevents or hinders certain activities (running, various ways of sitting, etc.) (28-29).

The Handmaids are, without a doubt, the group whose costumes cause the most impact. In Offred's own words: "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 11)<sup>7</sup>. These red robes only emphasize the Handmaids' subjugation, as the color is meant to symbolize blood, the women's menstruation and fertility, while the white headdresses that shield their faces serve the purpose of making it hard to engage in any social interaction not approved by Gilead. In fact, the color red is not only present in the Handmaids clothing, but in a plethora of elements throughout the entire novel: the Red Center; the red tulips in Serena's garden; the red Birthmobiles; the red smiles on the sacks over the hanged men's heads; and, most intriguingly, Offred's name has a double meaning – it means she belongs to Commander Fred Waterford, but it is also a clever play on the words "Off" and "Red".

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<sup>7</sup> From now on, only the novel's pages will be indicated between brackets after quotations or whenever referenced throughout the text, without reference to the author or title.

Parallel to the Handmaids' red, is also relevant to further explore the meaning behind the Wives' blue. Having the Wives be represented by blue has the intent of giving them a sort of pure and angelic quality. Traditionally, blue is often associated with the Virgin Mary, the virtuous Madonna, but it is also known to be a masculine colour. Knowing this, some scholars seem to agree that Atwood chose blue for the Wives with intentional irony. For example, Martin argues that "this association is ironic, for although the wives will (perhaps) have children without ever having sex, here the 'immaculate conception' will take place through the exploitation of the Handmaids, in compensation [*sic.*] for the wives' sterility" (47). The contrast between the Handmaid's red and the Wives' blue is a stark one and this is not, most likely, an innocent decision on Margaret Atwood's part. It is quite clear that these two groups of women are set to be adversaries, pitted against one another by the men-made social rules of Gileadean society. This reality is something that even their colors are meant to suggest, considering how opposite blue and red seem to be in any color scheme, no matter how or where these two colors are used – they will always have two very different connotations. About this contrast, Andrea Jonsson explores the different meanings behind the red and the blue in *The Handmaid's Tale*, claiming that the red represents life, while the blue represents death (1) – red for life, because only the Handmaids can provide, through their fertility; and blue for death, because the Wives are barren and no life can come from their wombs. As Jonsson states:

The colors used to categorize the two characters into their respective group of women, red and blue, contribute to the readers' perception of them. As the colors have opposite connotations they strengthen the analysis of women being divided against each other in this patriarchal society. Offred's red dress deepens the perception of her as feminine and life-giving whereas

Serena Joy's blue color contributes to the perception of her as more masculine and cold, unable to carry a child but also as an enforcer of patriarchal values and ideas (15).

These complex meanings hidden behind the colours worn by the different groups of women are not, at all, pointless when it comes to their social performances. Case in point, the red that represents the Handmaids serves as an inescapable reminder of their role and their duty in Gilead. Proof of this is the fact that Offred admits that she feels like a failure every time she finds blood on her underwear and realises she has once again not been able to perform her role in plenitude, failing at what is expected of her as a Handmaid – “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own” (115). This confession is also a clear indicator of how Gilead has been able to change Offred, making her wish she had fallen pregnant after an institutionalized rape ceremony.

Regardless, these “status symbols” are not enough to effectively portray a certain role in a believable way, which is why there must be a behavioural pattern that intimately corresponds to those symbols. According to Goffman (*Presentation* 15), when this happens it means that there is a consistency between “Appearance”, which “tells us the performer's social status”, and “Manner”, which “tells us the interaction role the individual will be playing in the situation”. Nevertheless, even if the “Appearance” and the “Manner” adopted by the individuals do align, in the end, these are just mechanisms used to portray a role and give a believable performance – one which is not the individual's true self, it is a “mask”. For example, as it was argued above, there is a direct correlation between the Handmaid's red dresses and their behaviour, as it physically constraints them and reminds them of what is expected of them; however, this is a role most of them do not believe in and are not genuinely invested in. As Simone de Beauvoir states, “even if each woman



dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played . . . she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not.” (qtd. in Goffman 37). Truthfully, there is hardly any sort of opportunity for the performers in Gilead to drop their “front” and be themselves. Every moment of the citizens’ lives is controlled by an omnipresent surveillance network, one that pressures the individuals into playing their parts as faithfully as possible at all times. In line with this, Lisa Nakamura affirms that “surveillance does more than simply watch or observe bodies. It remakes the body as a social actor, classifying some bodies as normative and legal, and some as illegal and out of bounds. There is no form of surveillance that is innocent” (221). This clearly demonstrates how powerful the mere thought of being watched is, establishing the gaze as an extremely persuasive weapon wielded by those in power, especially considering the fact that Gilead is an authoritarian regime.

Gilead’s surveillance is so pervasive that people act according to the regime’s directives even when there is not an actual physical source of observation – there is still a prevailing sense of being watched, something which is reinforced by the prescribed repetition of the phrase “Under His Eye”. In Roschman’s words:

Gileadean rhetoric frames the entire society as being constantly under the surveillance of an omniscient and omnipotent God; one of the prescribed phrases that Offred exchanges with another handmaid is ‘Under His Eye’ (49). While the phrase is used as a customary farewell, and is meant to convey feelings of protection and benevolence, its effect is quite the opposite (54).

Besides, the uncertainty of who is an Eye makes it hard to feel at ease under any circumstance, as any person the individual encounters could be a secret agent reporting any type of defiance to those in power – this leads to the idea that everyone is watching everyone, turning people against each other over mutual distrust and fear, something which serves the dictatorship as a strategy against possible organized rebellions. This constant mistrust among the citizens generates what Alotaibi (38) designates as “*self-surveillance*”. An example of how internalized this suspicion is can be found when Offred, in the company of Ofglen, her shopping partner, says that she is her partner’s spy and vice versa (30). Undoubtedly, this creates an atmosphere of uneasiness and anxiety, almost like a witch-hunt, as they never know who might turn against them and report their actions with malicious intent. The type of surveillance exercised by Gilead is very similar to the effect created by Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon in prisons, a concept which is discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The Panopticon is known for the way it mentally affects those inside its circular structure who are, supposedly, under the constant observation of a guard inside a tower positioned in the middle of the building – the guard sees everyone, but no one sees the guard. Alas, just the idea of possibly being watched dissuades the inmates from trying any form of insurgency (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200-201). This is precisely what happens in Gilead, as most of the surveillance is invisible to the observed citizens. Obviously, in Gilead’s case the “guard” in the tower takes shape in those in power, the oppressors, which means that the Gileadean regime upholds a hierarchical observation of its citizens (Foucault 170-171). This hierarchical observation happens when there is a great discrepancy between the ones in power (the observers) and the rest of the citizens (the observed), meaning that the gaze exercised by the powerful over the oppressed has the effect of empowering those who see while, at the same time, disempowering those who are seen – “the hierarchical gaze contributes to establishing a power

relation where an unequal relationship between the subject and the object exists. This power relation will empower one and disempower the other” (Davidsen 7). It is also relevant to mention that this self-imposed omnipresent surveillance by Gilead can be interpreted as what Pierre Bourdieu defines as “symbolic violence”,<sup>8</sup> considering the fact that the idea of being constantly watched by someone who has power over those it watches works almost as a “magical” thing that becomes ingrained in the minds of those who are watched – they do not see it, but they assume it is there and thus act according to what they believe is appropriate. Consequently, by adjusting their performance to what those in power expect, the observed individuals are accepting their domination, even if they do not realise it. In the words of Bourdieu:

The practical acts of knowledge and recognition of the magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated that are triggered by the magic of symbolic power and through which the dominated, often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting the limits imposed, often take the form of *bodily emotions* – shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt – or *passions* and *sentiments* – love, admiration, respect (38).

To understand how social interaction in Gilead works, it is important to acknowledge the three types of gazes established by Davidsen: the supervising gaze, which disempowers (24), the desiring gaze, which can either disempower or empower (27), and the egalitarian gaze, which empowers (31). Indeed, all three forms can be found in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and depending on

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence” applied to dystopian societies is further explored by Maria Gonçalves in *O feminino distópico: as vozes de Brave New World e de The Handmaid’s Tale* (74-87).

which one is being used during a certain social interaction, it has always an undeniable effect on the characters' behaviour, actions and speech – it affects their performance. First of all, the supervising gaze is the one exercised by Gilead over all its citizens, especially through the Guardians who patrol the streets, which makes them a physical symbol for Gilead's mostly invisible supervision – “The Guardians in the Republic of Gilead affect the citizens' behaviour in two ways. Firstly, the Guardians serve as a visualisation of the power the government holds. Being seen by the Guardians implies that citizens are seen by the government. The knowledge of what the Guardians represent works as a motivation for certain behaviours” (Davidsen 25). As a result, the supervising gaze is disempowering, because people lose all their free will and are forced to act exactly as it is expected of them, permanently fearful of who might be watching. Secondly, the desiring gaze is closely linked to the gendered gaze and this type of observation is mostly disempowering to the women of Gilead, because it turns them into what men want from them and nothing more – “The woman's independence and self-control is removed on behalf of the man's needs. She is reduced to a powerless character who exists only as a tool for the man and his actions. The result of the active, male gaze is a disempowered and passive female” (Davidsen 11). Nevertheless, the desiring gaze can also be empowering and proof of this is, for example, when Offred teases the young guards at the gates but, more importantly, when Offred realises she has some sort of power over the Commander after he invites her to his office – he lusts after her and she is empowered to take advantage of his desire. Lastly, the egalitarian gaze happens when two people of the same status look at each other with empathy, because they share the same circumstances. In fact, this is the predominant gaze among the Handmaids and, for example, it is the gaze shared between Offred and Ofglen, as they grow more intimate during their daily walks together – as Offred recounts, they no longer bother with the prescribed formalities, greeting each

other with a smile instead (254), which means that they see each other as equals and do not feel the need to perform exactly like they would with someone who casts upon them a supervising or a desiring gaze, forsaking altogether the mandatory “Beatitudes”.

With that in mind, it becomes quite clear how constraining it is to be watched and, consequently, how much of the individual’s behaviour is moulded by those who watch him. In Gilead’s case, the surveillance is a powerful tool in the regime’s oppressive arsenal and it becomes particularly dangerous because it is put into practice in a dissimulated way. This camouflaged surveillance only strengthens those in power, creating a state of fear that consumes the citizens not only in terms of their external actions but also their very thoughts. For instance, this utter control of the individual is put into evidence when Offred, while listening to one of Aunt Lydia’s pious speeches, thinks about killing the Aunt and even that simple inner defiance scares her, as if even just her mere thoughts of rebellion were enough to incriminate her. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that there are few who dare to go against the regime and those who actually dare act against it, do it very discreetly and covertly, in order to evade Gilead’s seemingly inescapable surveillance. This means that those who are defiant have to work much harder on keeping their “masks”; after all, besides not being true-believers they are also rebels, which makes them an extreme inconvenience to Gilead and, thus, extremely at risk of being severely penalized if their true intentions are brought to light. Accordingly, Roschman confirms this idea by arguing that “those who do not benefit from patriarchal power face a choice: they can perform in a way that minimizes their otherness and reinforces patriarchal dominance, or they can deviate in full view of the patriarchal panopticon and risk punishment” (16).

Considering that every person in Gilead is forced into accepting whatever role is prescribed to them by those in power means that some, if not most, individuals feel malcontent with what is

expected of them in their new function. As Goffman explains: “When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it.” (17). This is true in the Gileadean society, particularly for the Handmaids, who are literally sent to a sort of ‘school’ in order to learn how to effectively perform their social role and fulfil their duty to the community. Learning how to perform a role is learning how to build an act, a character of whom it is expected a certain predetermined behaviour. As Goffman puts it, “a performance is, in a sense, ‘socialised’, moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (*Presentation* 22). Knowing that all performances in Gilead are under the pressure of being enacted in a violent tyrannical regime, it comes as no surprise that most of them are simply for the sake of appearances. As a consequence, this means that individuals do not believe in their roles and behave in accordance to it purely because their lives depend on it – it is a lie fuelled by how terrified they are of the consequences of failing at what is expected of them. Evidently, not everyone in Gilead is lying while performing their social role, as there are actually those who are truly committed to their position in society and gladly carry out their duties. That being so, it can be argued that Gilead’s citizens are divided into two groups: the believers and the unbelievers. A division such as this fits perfectly into what Goffman states when he separates and defines those who willingly play their parts and those who do not:

When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of this audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term sincere for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. ... the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a

kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously (10).

That being said, it is fairly easy to determine who in Gilead belongs to which of the two categories proposed by Goffman – most of the oppressed are “cynical” and most of those in power are “sincere”. The use of the word “most” here is important because, objectively, and perhaps surprisingly, not all those who are included in a supposedly oppressed social category are totally against the regime – this is put into evidence when Offred, during one of her walks with her fellow Handmaid Ofglen, acknowledges that her partner “has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox,. . . She may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can’t take the risk” (31). Offred’s fear of failing to behave how she is supposed to in front of someone she assumes is a “sincere” actor, seems to automatically confirm that there must be Handmaids who are genuinely dedicated to the role forced upon them. It is also relevant to acknowledge the fact that even those in power are bound to the responsibility of performing a role and, although they are the ones with the fewer reasons to feel frustrated about their situation, not all of them seem happy to perform in accordance of what is expected of them. An obvious indicator of this situation is how Commander Fred and his wife Serena, a couple who was involved in the foundation of Gilead, both show dissident behaviour and repeatedly transgress the rules they helped create. This just proves how right Foucault’s assessment is: “Where there is power, there is resistance” (*The History of Sexuality* 95). Indeed, Commander Fred notoriously transgresses the established boundaries on multiple circumstances, but his misbehaviour is particularly intriguing when he invites Offred to his office (a place where not even his Wife is allowed to enter under any circumstances) and makes her visit him regularly from then on – this breaks the rules set between a Commander and his assigned

Handmaid, as they should not have any type of relationship or intimate contact besides the mandatory copulation – The Ceremony – and, even then, they are always accompanied by the Wife. As for Serena, she shows her defiance when she asks Offred to sleep with Nick, their household driver, to increase Offred's chances of getting pregnant.

This unacceptance of prescribed roles is extremely relevant throughout the entirety of Offred's story. People are unhappy with their social roles and what is expected of them, which leads to rebellious actions and nonconformist behaviour. Interestingly, most of these rebellious acts against Gilead are committed by a group of people or, at least, a pair of individuals who share some sort of secret known only to them. This is what Goffman calls "team-performances", in which every individual involved depends on each other to keep whatever secret they share – these shared performances are one of the most important aspects in the novel, as Offred is a part of several of them.

## 2.2. Offred

As the narrator of this story, Offred grants direct access to her every thought and motivation behind her actions. After being forcefully taken from her husband and daughter, Offred is aware that the person she must become in Gilead, as a Handmaid, is a performance, a role she must play in order to survive: "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (104). However, even as she obediently plays her role, she is constantly haunted by nightmares and flashbacks about her former life, when she was with her family. These are, as Goffman describes, "secret consumptions" (*Presentation* 26), which are discrepancies between appearances and reality that should not be openly revealed in



front of an audience who cannot be trusted. It is mostly due to these “secret consumptions” that Offred is motivated to act against Gilead and attempt to escape it, to be reunited with her husband and daughter.

In the television series, these “secret consumptions” are turned into recurrent flashback scenes that show moments of the protagonist’s past life and memories of her family. Moreover, Offred’s narration through voice-over is one of the most important indicators of how rebellious she is, as she literally tells the spectator every thought she has against Gilead, always using a very honest and spirited speech, which seems to be an amplified version of the book’s inner monologue. In fact, right from the first episode, it is made quite clear how determined Offred is on surviving for herself and her family and that she is aware of the fact that, to do so, she will have to perform convincingly in front of an omnipresent audience: “Someone is watching. Here, someone is always watching. Nothing can change. It all has to look the same. Because I intend to survive for her. Her name is Hannah. My husband was Luke. My name is June.” (Season 1, “Offred” 00:55:22-00:55:52).

As a Handmaid, Offred feels completely detached from the other women in the house. With no activities allowed to the Handmaids besides their daily shopping walk and exercise, Offred longs to help Rita (the Martha who serves in the same household) around the kitchen, but that would be breaking the rules and overstepping the boundaries set to her as a Handmaid. She does not even try to offer her help, as she knows the other woman would not be receptive of such an offer, not only because the kitchen is not Offred’s place to occupy, but also because Marthas and Handmaids are not supposed to develop any sort of kinship: “even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (16). Besides, the kitchen is what Goffman calls a “setting”

or “front region” (*Presentation* 66), which asks for a performance that simply is not meant for Offred to participate in, as it is the Martha’s “setting”, not the Handmaid’s. Taking that into consideration, Offred seems to understand this notion, as she does not even attempt to offer her help, respecting Rita’s role and the “setting” inherent to it. Goffman explains this behaviour, saying that: “decorous behaviour may take form of showing respect for the region and setting one finds oneself in, this show of respect may, of course, be motivated by a desire to impress the audience favourably, or avoid sanctions, etc.” (*Presentation* 67). This proves to be the case, because Offred resents being alienated by the other women in the house and wishes she could have more interaction with Rita, especially to have a source of information and gossip, which the Marthas are known to pass among themselves. Offred wonders about how the Marthas come by their information, assuming that they must, covertly, listen to conversations behind closed doors, just as Offred admits doing herself.

Although Offred’s status as a literary heroine is debatable and has been a topic of discussion among critics and scholars, it is undeniable that she starts off as a defiant character towards her oppressors. Indeed, most of her rebellious actions take place on the first half of her tale and one of the first acts of defiance Offred commits is refusing to see the room she sleeps in as hers; she does not want it to belong to her and refuses that attachment to the Waterford household. Nevertheless, at a certain point in the novel this changes and she, eventually, ends up claiming ownership over the room. In her loneliness, Offred finds some solace when she discovers a hidden, dangerous phrase scratched inside her closet, which she assumes has been left by the Handmaid that came before her – “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” (82), Latin for “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” (290) and this becomes another form of silent rebellion. With no other form of companionship, Offred takes this forbidden message as a friend who offers advice,

repeating those words to herself like a prayer, even when she does not know what they mean. To Offred, this serves as a bridge that connects her to the woman who suffered the same faith as her, in the same room, and even though she does not know who the woman was, she feels a sort of camaraderie towards her. Additionally, she vehemently rejects Gilead's attempts at taking away her real name, as a strategy to make her forget her past and her true self; even though she knows there is a chance no one will ever call her by her true name ever again, she keeps it alive in her memory almost as a token of hope: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (129-130). It is also important to mention how meaningful Offred's inner dialogue and memories of the family she lost are as a subversive mechanism against Gilead's forceful destruction of her identity, which makes it another form of silent rebellion. While this seems to be insufficient and ineffective as a form of open dissidence for most critics, such as Stillman and Johnson, Hilde Staels (465) disagrees with their position: "The scholars ignore Offred's conscious effort to call the lost, loved ones back into existence. They do not try to comprehend the articulation of her inner world as a deliberate attempt at survival. Instead, they approach the text in a utilitarian way". Nevertheless, it can be argued that some of Offred's acts of defiance unintentionally push her closer to what Gilead's patriarchal regime wants her to be – a mere body to be used. This is quite obvious when Offred consciously teases the guards at the gates, during one of her daily walks to the shops. Knowing the guards, who rank low in Gilead's social hierarchy, are forbidden to touch women, she finds pleasure in taunting them with her figure:

I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously (36).

This is one of the situations that motivate Stillman and Johnson (76) to argue that Offred fails at being an actively subversive heroine, because her attempts at being rebellious turn against her, pushing her father into what Gilead wants from her – a void woman, whose value is reduced to her body. During one of Offred's monthly medical check-ups, the doctor offers to "help" her get pregnant, admitting to having done it to other Handmaids. Offred politely declines his proposal, afraid to offend him by saying no and suffering some sort of punishment for it. When she refuses, she does so out of fear of being caught or that this offer might be a test to her honest commitment to her role, even though she admits to herself that this refused transgression could have been her salvation (96). In this situation, Offred is careful to never drop her "mask", because she knows how easily the doctor could put her life in danger if he wanted to – all it would take to forfeit her life would be a lie from the doctor, in case he took offense to her refusal and wanted to punish her for it. Offred's denial is a clear indicator of how scared Offred is of being caught transgressing the rules, even if that transgression is something which could eventually come to benefit her, proving how powerful Gilead's supervision and the idea of its omnipresence is – just the fear of being under observation and the notion of what could happen to her if she was found out is enough to make her refuse an offer that could be her salvation.

Another distinct sign of Offred's compliance to Gilead's rules and indoctrination can also be noted when she admits that she is reluctant to look at her own naked body, asking herself how is it possible to have shown it at the beach, wearing revealing bathing suits in front of men – "My nakedness is strange to me already . . . Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest" (98). This proves that Offred is ultimately powerless against the indoctrination she is put under and begins to lose sense of her own body and identity, becoming accustomed to the patriarchal ideology which preaches women's modesty. Truthfully, there are a few situations that put into evidence how successfully Gilead manages to change mentalities through its rigorous indoctrination. An example of this reality is when Offred and Ofglen meet the Japanese delegation, on their way home from shopping. The way the Japanese women are dressed seems completely shocking and alien to Offred:

It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before (45).

Obviously, this only proves that Offred has become accustomed to the modesty of women's clothing in Gilead, which covers them from head to toe, and has interiorized Aunt Lydia's exhortations about modesty, how women should always strive for invisibility and avoid being

“penetrated” by the male gaze (46-47). As a consequence, Offred no longer feels comfortable with the way women used to dress in the time before; to her, the Japanese women are an oddity and even she acknowledges the change in herself, realizing it has taken so little time for Gilead’s ultraconservative teachings to sink in and replace her past beliefs. According to Pettersson, this change in Offred’s mentality is not something she has no agency over, as she is basically helpless against Gilead’s forceful indoctrination. As Pettersson argues, “she cannot help herself having that opinion. The discourse of Gilead is too powerful. However, she is aware of it and she knows that she actually does not want to think like that, yet it is unavoidable” (9).

In addition, another example of how thoroughly Offred has internalized the self-conscious modesty preached in Gilead is when the delegation asks to take a picture of her and Ofglen and Offred quickly denies it with a shake of her head, keeping her eyes on the ground and her face hidden by the headpiece of her Handmaid uniform. It is interesting to understand that the women from the Japanese delegation are as fascinated by Handmaids as Offred seems to be by their provocative appearance. There is a mutual sense of fascination and astonishment because the two counterparts recognize that they are opposite poles of the female condition. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman explains that when the role of an individual is considered prestigious, for whatever reason, his audience will tend to treat him with the deference his performance demands, creating a “a state of mystification in regard to the performer” (45). This is exactly what happens during this encounter because the women from the Japanese delegation are aware of how sacred the Handmaids are to the Gileadean society. Accordingly, “the audience itself will often co-operate by acting in a respectful fashion, in awed regard for the sacred integrity imputed to the performer” (Goffman, *Presentation* 45), which is proven by the fact that the delegation does not attempt to photograph the Handmaids without asking their consent beforehand.

In the end, it can be argued that Offred lets herself accept her role without much resistance and ends up being as passive as she proved to be before Gilead took over, when she did nothing to fight the first signs that something was going to happen – she even admits that she would not go to the marches and protests because her husband thought they were futile (278). Even back then, Offred would just do what she was told to do, confine herself to her husband and daughter, and mock the people who tried to protest and actively resist the rise of oppression, such as her own mother and her best friend Moira. As explained by Stillman and Johnson (78): “Offred’s accommodation of herself and her life to the misogyny of the contemporary United States, her acceptance of such condition as ordinary and usual, is mirrored by her gradual succumbing to the conditions of Gilead”. With that being said, it is clear that Offred struggles to keep her identity, as she is constantly torn between what she used to be and what she has to become in Gilead in order to survive.

As it has been mentioned before, *Hulu*’s version of Offred is a lot more rebellious than the original protagonist and the scene which is meant to represent the part of the book where Offred meets the Japanese delegation is transformed into a meeting at the Waterford’s household, where Commander Fred and Serena receive a trade delegation from Mexico. This situation is an important proof of how aware Offred is of the fact that she needs to perform in accordance with what is expected of her, especially because she is performing in front of an audience composed by people who literally have her life in their hands. When she is asked for her true name by one of the guests, she dutifully does not give it, arguing she does not use it anymore and, furthermore, when Deputy Ambassador Castillo, who is a woman, asks if she chose to be a Handmaid, she lies and confirms it. More importantly, the tensest moment of their exchange happens when the Ambassador asks if she is happy – Offred looks completely caught off guard by this question and

it takes a while to regain control of her shocked expression and repair the damage made to her performance by quickly affirming that she has found happiness. This is a very difficult moment for Offred, as her performance is put in danger by unscripted questions she did not prepare for beforehand, but she proves to be an apt performer by quickly adjusting her demeanour, which allows her to “keep face”. As Goffman explains, “A person may be said to *be out of face* when he participates in a contact with others without having ready a line of the kind participants in such situations are expected to take.”, but Offred manages to avoid this situation by keeping what the sociologist designates as “poise” - “the capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others” (*Interaction Ritual* 8). Notwithstanding, when she is left alone with the Ambassador, Offred confesses she lied about being happy in Gilead, declaring it is a brutal place where Handmaids are prisoners who get beaten into submission and raped every month – this scene is a striking opposite to the one where Offred talks to the Ambassador in front of the Commander, especially considering how different Offred’s performance is on both occasions, due to the fact that in the first one she has an audience who cannot see her perform in such a way and, in the second one, she does not need to adapt to that audience.

Returning to the novel’s context, despite what has been said about Offred’s difficulty to resist falling into the role demanded of her, the fact is that she is involved in multiple secrets throughout the novel, something which goes against every rule imposed to her as a Handmaid and undermines the strict order of Gilead. In fact, she keeps all three types of secrets established by Goffman – from her knowledge of Mayday, to her secret meetings with Moira, the night encounters with the Commander, and the forbidden relationship with Nick, she becomes part of more than one “team-performance”.



### 2.3. “Team-performances” in Gilead

As mentioned before, Erving Goffman applies the term “team-performances” when more than one individual is involved in keeping a “front”, meaning that there is more than one person invested in acting a certain way in front of their audience, to achieve a common goal. In order for these “team-performances”, or “dramaturgical co-operations” to work efficiently it is fundamental that those involved fully trust each other to maintain whatever they are keeping from their audience a secret. As Goffman explains: “Each team-mate is forced to rely on the good conduct and behaviour of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him. There is, then, perforce, a bond of reciprocal dependence linking team-mates to one another” (*Presentation* 50).

It is actually surprising to find quite a few examples of “team-performances” in Gilead, considering how hard it must be to trust someone in a regime where everyone is suspicious of everyone and every move they make is monitored by a constant network of surveillance. This becomes even more remarkable considering that it is known that there are secret agents posing as “real” citizens hidden in society, the Eyes, which means that trusting anyone is almost like taking a leap of faith, never knowing if that trust is being misplaced and dooming. Knowing this, the “team-performances” found in Gilead are formed either due to extreme necessity and desperation or out of obligation. Case in point, some of the most noteworthy “dramaturgical co-operations” and thus deserving of further analysis are those established between the Handmaids as a group and those between Offred and other individuals, like the Commander, Serena, Nick, Ofglen, and Moira. As Offred asserts, “There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another” (199), and it is mostly through these alliances that the characters find ways to be subversive, go against what is expected of their roles and undermine the oppressive patriarchal theocracy.

### 2.3.1. The Handmaids

The Handmaids are fertile women who are stripped of their individualities and identities in order to play their role in the new society, which is to give children to their assigned Commander. They are seen as a salvation to Gilead – as Offred herself declares: “I am a national resource” (101). This loss of the Handmaids’ previous identities is crucial to the new regime because this society needs these women to blindly correspond to a preprogrammed role created by it, for which they have “the ideal qualifications” (Goffman, *Presentation* 29). Those qualifications, and the reduction of the Handmaids to those capacities, are very succinctly and pertinently disclosed by Offred, when she says: “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (212). Arguably, the Handmaids are the most tormented of all the social groups. With the responsibility of providing healthy babies to the Commanders and their Wives, Handmaids are constantly under a tremendous amount of pressure – a weight put on their shoulders not only by the couple they serve but by the entire society, as the continuity of the race depends on their fertility. Given the importance of these women’s role, they spend most of their time isolated from the rest of society. In fact, all human contact they have is fleeting and restricted to their household, their daily shopping partner (another Handmaid) and the few gatherings and ceremonies that require all Handmaids to be present. Their daily lives are uneventful – they are forbidden to read or write, their food is cooked for them, their baths are drawn for them; their only obligatory activities are shopping for food and exercising, to keep their bodies healthy and ready for pregnancy.

To perform their role exactly as it is expected, these “wombs” are actually trained by the Aunts at an institution called The Rachel and Leah Center or, as it is also known, the Red Center.

In there, they are drugged into calm subjects and indoctrinated by the older women in a way that can be compared to brainwashing – something which has more chances of being successful, because it is performed by women (Aunts) on women (Handmaids). As Fredrik Pettersson (14) points out, “by using women to represent antifeminist ideas it gets that more effective, since it will be more difficult to realize that other women would want to prevent the evolvement of female rights and power, consequently convincing other women that the feminist ideas and arguments are not legitimate”. The Handmaids are forced to completely forget their entire past, including their own names, personalities, and memories – they must become a passive blank page, ready to be inscribed anew with Gilead’s doctrine. In the words of Atwood: “They must learn to renounce their previous identities, to know their place and their duties, to understand that they have no real rights but will be protected up to a point if they conform, and to think so poorly of themselves that they will accept their assigned fate and not rebel or run away.” (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”). It is in here that the Handmaids are programmed to deal with the ultimate purpose of their role – the pregnancy that should result from it; as such, their training even includes breathing exercises, in preparation for the moment they give birth. Furthermore, this indoctrination has the intention of turning the Handmaids into a collectivity of “void” women who are nothing more than obedient servants of Gilead, without real names or any special features that might set apart one from the other (Kauffman 246). Everything about them and all their activities are directly associated to their reproductive function.

In the Red Center, the Aunts preach Gilead’s religious fanaticism through the biblical texts and the “Beatitudes” that serve as greetings and conversational proverbs: “*Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent*” (138), which represent the blind obedience and submission that is expected of them while, at the same time, homogenizing speech in favour of the regime’s ideology. Actually,

these “Beatitudes” can actually serve as a strategy to help the characters “keep face” and avoid embarrassments, something that Goffman refers to as “defensive and protective practices”:

We find that preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid these embarrassments and that corrective practices are constantly employed to compensate for discrediting occurrences that have not been successfully avoided. When the individual employs these strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, we may refer to them as ‘defensive practices’; when a participant employs them to save the definition of the situation projected by another, we speak of ‘protective practices’ or ‘tact’. Together, ‘defensive and protective practices’ comprise the techniques employed to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others (*Presentation 7*).

On the one hand, the “Beatitudes” are used to avoid falling out of character when confronted by an unexpected social encounter or situation that conflicts with the character’s performance; on the other hand, the “Beatitudes” serve as part of the “front” the individuals hope to maintain when they do not genuinely believe in it, sometimes even saying them in a sarcastic manner, using it only to deceive their audience. These are “face-saving practices”, behavioural strategies that can be inherent to the individual or even to an entire society to avoid losing “face” during a social performance, many times becoming a recognizable characteristic of those who choose to utilize them (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* 13). That is exactly what Gilead’s “Beatitudes” are, the only difference is that, in this case, those “face-saving practices” are not willingly or freely chosen and created by the people employing them, but something those in power demand of them.

Noticeably, Atwood’s novel has some heavy religious connotations, especially as it takes the biblical story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, as an archetype for what happens

between the Commanders, their Wives and the Handmaids. As the author explains, “The biblical precedent is the story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids. One man, four women, 12 sons – but the handmaids could not claim the sons. They belonged to the respective wives” (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”). In Gilead, these religious undertones are used as a justification for how their society works. However, the religious beliefs and biblical texts those in power choose to wield as a foundation to their ideology are unquestionably misused and manipulated into something that conveniently fits into what they want Gilead to be. As Judith Butler (36) argues: “The self-justification of a repressive or subordinating law almost always grounds itself in a story about what it was like *before* the advent of the law, and how it came about that the law emerged in its present and necessary form”. As a consequence, Gileadean society is based on a manipulated and, one could argue satirized, version of religion, which misuses biblical “law” as the men in power see fit, since they are the only ones with access to it and, consequently, are free to interpret and preach it without being contested. Over the years, this use of religion as a tyrannical mechanism has made some critics accuse Margaret Atwood’s novel of being “anti-religious”. To those claims, Atwood continuously answers using the argument that if a dictatorship were ever to be established the US it would invariably find its roots in Christianity, considering the country’s history and conservative tradition. That being said, in Atwood’s own words: “So the book is not ‘antireligion.’ It is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny; which is a different thing altogether” (“Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump”).

Furthermore, at the Red Center, the Aunts spin Gilead’s sexual oppression into a heroic tale, as if it was some sort of feminist utopia, women should be thankful for having been rescued from a society where they lived in permanent fear of being assaulted and raped, whereas Gilead

does everything to protect them. One of the most intense ways this fabricated “truth” is fed to the Handmaids is through the movies they are forced to watch once a week. Most of those movies are old pornos, showing brutal and sadistic scenes, where women are treated as sexual objects by men. Offred describes these films in a very graphic way, recounting how they would show women being raped, beaten, hanged, gutted, maimed with garden shears, and so on (183).

Other times, the Aunts will put on “Unwomen documentaries”, showing rebellious women from the past during feminist protests and how those women, now deemed Unwomen, were rewarded for their fruitless rebellion – by being sent to the Colonies to suffer until they die. The goal of this activity is to ensure the Handmaids accept their new reality and count themselves lucky for having such a privileged role in the new society; at the same time, showing what happens to women at the Colonies serves the purpose of dissuading any type of insurrectionary behaviour, warning them of the consequences awaiting them should they dare act against Gilead.

In the article “‘From a Distance It Looks Like Peace’: Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, Angela Laflen suggests this indoctrination through the use of movies is a clear indicator of how similar Gilead inner workings are to Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, considering how the Nazi party successfully used film and other visual elements to spread their ideological propaganda.<sup>9</sup> According to Laflen (84), by using this method, Atwood manages to make her audience ponder why autocratic regimes succeed in gathering support so easily through visual manipulation, taking into especial consideration how the Third Reich accomplished to manipulate people into thinking resistance was pointless through

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<sup>9</sup> Laflen compares the movies shown at the Red Center to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1936;1938), two films that served to spread Hitler’s nazi ideology and justify their “pursuit of ethnic purity and their campaign of extermination” (86).

ideological and propagandist films. Besides, using these old movies also supports Gilead's purpose of rewriting history in a way that serves its newly-imposed ideology, especially when it comes to women's rights and duties. By changing people's memories about what the past was, those in power manage to eradicate it and make it what they want it to be, as if all the things they did not agree with never happened, focusing on and keeping only whatever parts they can use in their favour. As Keers (76) points out, "not content with rewriting history by forgery, the totalitarian leader attempts the complete material erasure of any traces of a 'past' that does not coincide with the officially sanctioned version". However, this "destruction" of the past is not something that can be easily done and no matter how hard Gilead tries to indoctrinate and "brainwash" its citizens, especially the Handmaids, there is always some part of it alive in the memories of those who lived it. In fact, even those in power are aware that this resistance to change is inevitable, even more so when the new ideology is as shocking as Gilead's. Proof of this is the fact that Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that it is understandable for them to feel unhappy with their new role and to not instantly accept what is required of them: "You are a transitional generation, . . . It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts" (181). Obviously, the reasoning behind these claims is the idea that these women are the first to go through such a dramatic change – being ripped out of their lives and families and turned into a Handmaid – which means that they are also the last ones to have any memory of a past where things were different, because the ones who come after them will only know Gilead's reality and, therefore, ". . . they won't want things they can't have" (181).

Collectively, the Handmaids are one of the most important "team-performances" in the novel. As a group with a very particular duty to the community, they bond together over the

difficulty of their situation. Their bonding starts in the Red Center, where they all meet and watch each other being forced to forget their past selves and become a programmed subject of Gilead. Their common misfortune leads to what is described by Goffman as “colleague solidarity” (*Presentation* 102), creating a feeling of sorority among them. Their attachment to each other through solidarity fits perfectly into Goffman’s description of what “colleagues” are:

Colleagues may be defined as persons who present the same routine to the same kind of audience but who do not participate together, as team-mates do, at the same time and place before the same particular audience. Colleagues, as it is said, share a community of fate. In having to put on the same kind of performance, they come to know each other’s difficulties and points of view; whatever their tongues, they come to speak the same social language (*Presentation* 102).

This “colleague solidarity” among the Handmaids is very visible in a few moments recounted by Offred. For example, even though they are supposed to forget their names and become someone else entirely, the Handmaids defiantly share their true names with each other. To communicate, they learn to speak without one another through soundless whispers, lip-reading and touching each other when the Aunts are not looking (5). This clearly shows that the women in the Red Center feel the need to have human interaction and help each other, finding surreptitious ways to communicate as a team, without being caught by the Aunts. Besides sharing their names, the Handmaids also demonstrate their companionship and willingness to bend the rules for one another when Moira tries and fails to escape the Red Center, a defiance which earns her a crippling beating using steel cables – her feet are so badly swollen, the other Handmaids have to carry her to the classes. Besides, in a true gesture of “colleague solidarity”, they show their compassion by



smuggling extra packets of sugar from the cafeteria and passing them from bed to bed at night, until they reached Moira's bed (143) – although it might seem like a useless deed, it was all they could do.

The camaraderie between the Handmaids is noticeable even after the Handmaids leave the Red Center, mainly during the various collective events that Gilead makes them attend. In truth, these events are just ceremonies turned into euphoric spectacles, probably to keep the people's minds from growing bored and stopping them from contemplating their oppression – a common strategy put to use by tyrannical regimes. These gatherings can be of mandatory presence for a specific selection of citizens, like the Birth Day, or for all of them (with a few exceptions), like the Prayvanzas, the Salvagings, and Particutions. Nevertheless, even the events that are not of compulsory participation seem to be attended by most of the people and, according to Offred, it is because they crave the distraction it creates – “it's a form of entertainment, like a show or a circus.” (330).

Firstly, the Birth Day is one of the most important days not only for the Handmaids but for all of Gilead. A Handmaid who goes into labour is one step closer to fulfilling the supreme purpose of her role. The Birth Offred recounts is Janine's/Ofwarren's. The occasion is described as a celebration which gathers all of the Handmaids, the Wives, and some of the Aunts – noticeably, as it is considered a women's affair, no men are involved in the Birth Day and even the doctors stay in a van outside, only assisting the Handmaid if it is absolutely necessary. Going into labour does not automatically guarantee that Janine's duty is entirely accomplished – she must give birth to a healthy baby, a child that fits the criterion set by Gilead. If the child is stillborn or has any sort of fault, it will be considered a “shredder” or “Unbaby”. According to Offred, the odds of the baby

being healthy are one in four, due to how polluted the air and people's bodies became, and there is no way of telling the baby's health before the actual birth:

What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet? There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing, anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term (172).

The fear of birthing an "Unbaby" is very real to the Handmaids because it would make them failures at their role and, therefore, a disappointment to the entire society, as they all depend on the Handmaids to deliver a new generation. Moreover, conceiving a "shredder" means the Handmaid is "damaged goods" to Gilead and cannot perform her assigned role in society. If this misconceiving happens more than once, the Handmaid risks losing her role and becoming an Unwoman instead, sent to the Colonies as a punishment for her. During the birth, all the Handmaids feel as though they are giving birth themselves, feeling everything the Handmaid in labour is feeling. In fact, Offred's description of this moment is a very straightforward example of the aforementioned "colleague solidarity" described by Goffman – she recalls sweating through her dress and feeling phantom clenching pain, something which all of the Handmaids were feeling (193). When the child is born and given to the Wife, Offred is still in communion with the other Handmaids, saying "we are jubilant, it's a victory, for us all. We've done it" (196). However, once she leaves Janine's room, her sentiments change; witnessing a Handmaid fulfil her role, when she herself has not, takes a heavy toll on Offred and the other Handmaids – after the excitement of the

Birth Day, they are confronted by their own failure (197). Interestingly, while the Handmaid is the one who goes through all the pain and difficulties of giving birth, it is the couple she is assigned to that gets to enjoy the perks that come with it: the Handmaid is not allowed to see the child she carried in her womb, the Wife acts and is treated as if she gave birth herself, and the Commander gets a promotion for proving his virility and gifting a child to Gilead. Indeed, Janine/Ofwarren's only reward is simply to continue performing her role, not being sent to the Colonies; instead, as soon as she stops nursing the new-born baby and performs her duty in full to that family, she will be repositioned at a new household, to serve as Handmaid to a new Commander.

In the confusion of the Birth Day, the Handmaids take advantage of the situation and whisper among themselves, just like they used to do in the Red Center. While Janine is in labour, the Handmaids are required to chant encouraging words to help her, forming a feverish circle of prayer. It is in-between that chanting that they ask forbidden questions and pass information to each other, without the Aunts noticing their deception. On this occasion, Offred tries to find out anything she can about what may have happened to Moira, after she tried to escape again, but she is too afraid to continue the conversation after one of the Aunts catches a break in the chant.

Another intriguing part about the Birth Day is the fact that it gathers both the Handmaids and the Wives, but it only serves to accentuate how deeply disunited they are, as the two groups do not mingle or socialize with each other. While the Handmaids must help Janine in the actual process of giving birth, the Wives stay out of the delivery room, drinking, eating, gossiping, and having a make-believe version of the birth with the Wife whose baby Janine is delivering. The segregation between the two ranks of women is very evident when Offred recounts a conversation by the Wives: "Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right girls?" (177). This type of conversation is what Goffman designates as "derogation", a

term applicable to what the Wives say about the Handmaids behind their backs in this situation, as they do not talk to them in such a manner while face-to-face, which proves that individuals are rarely treated the same way when their being talked about behind their backs. This happens because, as Goffman explains, people do not feel the need to be pleasing towards the other person as soon as they are not face-to-face, which means that there is an inconsistency between how people act in front of each other and how people act behind each other's backs, especially when they know for certain the other person will not hear about it, or simply do not care if they do. Besides, the sociologist argues that the use of "uncomplimentary terms of reference", like the aforementioned use of the word "whores" to designate the Handmaids, is a technique used to make those who participate in the derogation feel better about themselves (*Presentation* 108-111).

This hatred of the Wives towards the Handmaids is further proven by the fact that Gilead created a law which forbids Wives to murder Handmaids, making it a crime punishable by death – they can do a lot of things to the Handmaid's, but killing them is forbidden and punishable by death, especially if the Handmaid happens to be pregnant (423). In addition, the Handmaids are forbidden to use any form of beauty care, which is something that must be left to the Wives, who do not want the Handmaids to be attractive in any way. According to Offred, they are simply vessels whose outer appearance and health are completely disregarded, just as long the inside of their bodies is apt to serve their purpose – "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (150). To the Wives, it is bad enough that they have to witness their husbands having sexual intercourse with the Handmaids, added to the fact that those Handmaids can give them something the Wife cannot – a child. Nevertheless, the Handmaids show their defiance against the rules imposed over their own bodies by surreptitiously using the butter that comes with their breakfast

to moisturize their face and hands, a rebellious gesture that seems to give them hope that one day, eventually, they will escape Gilead and once again be touched by someone who desires them (151). The animosity between the Wives and the Handmaids is, apparently, not a secret to the rest of the society; case in point, Aunt Lydia warns the Handmaids about how they are not going to be wholly accepted in the households they are going to serve in and asks them to be understanding towards the Wives – “It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it’s the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them . . . Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do . . . You must realize that they are defeated women” (73).

Secondly, the Prayvaganza is a gathering that can be of two types: a Men’s Prayvaganza, which is a celebration of military victories; or a Women’s Prayvaganza, which designates a ceremony where the Angels (high-ranking soldiers of Gilead) are assigned a Daughter through arranged marriages. It is a Women’s Prayvaganza that Offred gives testimony of in her tapes.

This is one of the gatherings that everyone in Gilead attends, but every single rank of Gilead’s social hierarchy is separated and strictly seated in accordance with their position in society, even the chairs are separated by railings, to make sure there is no mingling across the female ranks. As for the Handmaids, they are assembled inside a specific zone, limited by a rope and apart from everyone else, and are obligated to kneel on the ground during the entire ceremony. Besides, they are surrounded by heavily armed security, not for their protection, but “for whatever dangerous or subversive acts they think we [the Handmaids] might commit inside” (329), which means that Gilead fears what may arise from having the Handmaids gathered.

In truth, this event does provide one of the best opportunities for the Handmaids to talk, gossip, and conspire among themselves, because it is broadcasted live for the entire country to see.

In the words of Offred:

when we are kneeling, heads bowed slightly, I can hear from all around us a susurrations, like rustling of insects in tall dry grass: a cloud of whispers. This is one of the places where we can exchange news more freely, pass it from one to the next. It's hard for them to single out any one of us or hear what's being said. And they wouldn't want to interrupt the ceremony, not in front of the television cameras (330).

This excerpt perfectly shows that the Handmaids are aware of their sliver of freedom in this situation and, surreptitiously, find ways to go against the isolation inherent to their role, cooperating with each other every time they get the chance. This is only possible by virtue of Gilead not wanting to tarnish the front it has established as a perfect society, where women are treated with the utmost respect and are absolutely complacent with their situation.

Thirdly, the Salvaging is another "team-performance" by the Handmaids. To put it simply, the Salvagings are organized executions of dissidents and criminals by hanging. Like the Prayvaganzas, the Salvagings are televised and are divided into two versions: the Men's Salvagings, which only men are allowed to attend; and the Women's Salvagings, which are exclusively for women. Since the story is narrated by Offred, there is not a precise description of what exactly happens in a Men's Salvaging; nevertheless, its results are always publicly displayed on the Wall, where those who have been hanged are left exposed for all to see. Evidently, this is

another type of visual manipulation strategy by Gilead, as the Wall serves as a warning to dissuade any type of transgression any individual might be contemplating: “We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them” (52). About the Women’s Salvagings, Offred explains that these public hangings of female dissidents are not very common, either because women seem to have grown complacent with their oppression or they are too afraid to act against it. However, it is interesting to note the crimes for which the women hang at these Salvagings become “a secret language” among the other Handmaids. According to Offred, their crimes and their dissidence serve as an example for the rest of them, though the other’s dissidences they learn their own limitations and possibilities. Proof that the misdeeds of the hanged women serve as an inspiration to the rest of the Handmaids is Aunt Lydia’s admonition during her opening speech, warning them that the Salvagings will no longer reveal the crimes committed by those convicted, because it always led to an uprising of imitations among the Handmaids, who purposely recreated the transgressions they knew would lead them to their death (422).

This Salvaging is particularly important to the Handmaids as a “team-performance” because they are asked to “help” execute the women on trial, in a gesture that is meant to show their acceptance of this ceremony. Together, they are forced to become accomplices in the murder of their own “team-mates”, as if Gilead is trying to prove to them that they are not supposed to be friends or care for each other, which only furthers the argument that Gilead is intent on dividing and turning women against women: “I’ve leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others . . . then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman” (424). In *Hulu*’s televised version of this event is a very striking moment of camaraderie between the Handmaids, as it is Janine/Ofwarren

on trial. Because it is one of their own, one of their “team-mates”, at the sound of Aunt Lydia’s whistle the Handmaids refuse to do their duty by not throwing their stones, dropping them to ground instead, in what became one of the most important demonstrations of resistance in the series.

Lastly, the Particicution, which happens right after the Salvaging, is the execution of a Guardian (a low-ranking soldier) who allegedly committed rape. The Handmaids are asked to form a circle and are “set loose” on him by the Aunt presiding the ceremony, like a wild pack of wolves attacking its prey. With the blow of a whistle, the Handmaids are free to do whatever they want to the man in front of them, until they kill him with their bare hands. It is important to mention that the Guardian’s crime is aggravated by the accusation of having killed a pregnant Handmaid, a crime that visibly horrifies the Handmaids and provokes their fury. Even Offred is not immune to the outrage that rises among them (428).

To Offred’s surprise, it is Ofglen who leads the attack on the man and, after Offred manifests her disgust over her actions, Ofglen tells her his crime was not rape, but being a member of the rebel group Mayday, which she herself is a part of. By doing so, Ofglen shows she is committed to her “team-performance” and worthy of “a bond of reciprocal dependence” that links “team-mates”, keeping the secret she shared with this man by acting in a way that allows her to keep “a particular appearance of things” (Goffman, *Presentation* 51-52). This also means that the Guardian who is killed at the Particicution is being punished for his subversive actions, for going against the foundations of Gilead and not committing honestly to his role in this society. However, he is killed under false pretences, because convicting him for his true crime would disclose an inconvenient truth that undermines those in power – it would let people know that Gilead is being defied by a rebel organization that seeks to overthrow the regime and that would taint the idea of



its self-proclaimed utopian perfection, especially considering the fact that these events are televised for the entire country to see.

It is also important to take into consideration that not all “team-performances” by the Handmaids are positive or based on their “colleague solidarity” towards each other. In fact, the Testifying sessions that happen in the Red Center serve to demonstrate that the camaraderie between the Handmaids is not absolutely unyielding. In these sessions, the Handmaids sit in a circle and must retell stories of their past, situations when they were threatened or objectified by men. It goes without saying that this is just another one of Gilead’s strategies to make the Handmaids feel like they should be thankful for the protection they are given in this new society. As Aunt Lydia claims, they are “spoiled girls” (138) who are now free of the improprieties of the past, when women was constantly in danger and afraid. Offred recalls one of those sessions, when Janine/Ofwarren tells the story of how she was gang-raped and had an abortion at fourteen. After hearing her story, the other Handmaids are encouraged by Aunt Lydia to chant accusations at Janine, blaming her for what happened to her. The fact that the Handmaids participate in the shaming of Janine, one of their own “team-mates”, could be explained by their fear of disobeying what is expected of them in that situation; however, they do it in earnest, which means that Gilead’s indoctrination is actually effective and it has changed them, even if they try to resist it: “We meant it, which is the bad part” (112).

Indeed, Offred realises Gilead is succeeding in the endeavor of turning women against each other when she describes how she feels about Janine, after she tells her story: “She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her” (112). Moreover, the efficacy of their indoctrination is evident when Janine tells her story again

and does, in fact, blame herself for having been raped. This situation is a perfect example of what happens when someone does not behave as it is expected of them and their actions do not fit into what is inherent to their role: when Janine does not blame herself, she is jeered and punished; when Janine blames herself, as Gilead's ideology wants her to, she is rewarded.

All things considered, the Handmaids are probably the most oppressed group of all the factions that compose Gilead's society. Be that as it may, it is undeniable that they are also one of the groups with the strongest bond between them. In fact, the bond that the Handmaids share is what makes their "team-performance" and the "front" inherent to it so successfully achieved. This success is unmistakably proven by the fact that the Handmaids are able, time and again, to find ways to deviate from the rigid restrictions set to their role and take advantage of certain situations they are forced into, using them to their advantage. Regardless, as mentioned before, the sorority of the Handmaids is not "bulletproof" and there are a few in their midst who cannot be trusted to keep the group's secrets from being exposed to their oppressors. As a consequence, some characters, including Offred, create their own "team-performances" within the bigger group, including only those they believe they can trust.

### 2.3.2 Offred's "team-performances"

#### 2.3.2.1 The Commander

One of the most unexpected "team-performances" is the one between Offred and her Commander, Fred. After being told by Nick, the household driver, that the Commander has summoned her to meet him in his study late at night, Offred and the Commander start sharing a "dark secret" (Goffman, *Presentation* 87). This invitation takes Offred by surprise and leaves her

fearful of her fate, because these intimate meetings are a crime that could lead to some dangerous consequences, in case they were ever discovered. The relationship between any Handmaid and their Commanders is supposed to be strictly one of servitude and detachment. As Offred explains:

It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha, girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds for love (211).

The risk associated with these encounters is tremendous, but it is a risk which concerns mostly, if not entirely, Offred. Obviously, in a system such as Gilead, a Commander caught breaking the law would most likely get away with it easily, which makes the Handmaid the only one with something to lose in the eventuality of their liaison being brought to light. Offred is highly aware of how prejudicial this situation could be for her, fearing Serena's wrath and the possibility of being reclassified as an Unwoman. However, Offred would also be at risk if she declined the invitation, as it would be an affront to the Commander, one which could probably earn her a punishment just as bad as the one she could face if they were discovered (212). Whatever the case, it is a no-win situation for the Handmaid, she would be powerless over either outcome and, objectively, both options would lead to her death.

Offred's concern is further justified when she finds out that this is not the first time the Commander breaks the rules imposed to the impersonal relationship that should be maintained

between him and the Handmaid that serves him. Indeed, Offred is the second Handmaid assigned to Commander Fred's household and the same invitation to meet him in secrecy was also made to the previous woman. It is actually the Commander who confirms this information when Offred finds the courage to ask him about the Latin phrase she found scratched inside her closet. He confesses that Serena found out about their secret encounters and, soon after, the Handmaid hanged herself in her bedroom. The fact that this situation has happened before and the consequences only affected the Handmaid confirms that Offred has every reason to be worried about what might happen to her if their "team-performance" is exposed. Besides, this "dramaturgical co-operation" has a very perilous side to it, because there is barely any trust between the participants – the Commander trusts only that Offred will not disclose their secret for fear of the consequences and Offred trusts only that he won't do it because he wants something from her and does not want to lose his chance of getting it. For evident reasons, it is impossible to establish a relationship of absolute trust between two individuals who are on such different social categories, even more so considering that this is a "team-performance" shared by an oppressor and an individual who is under his oppression. Nevertheless, the Commander seems to discredit his own power when he is alone with Offred and, even though they will never truly be equals, he tries to put her at ease and acts in a way that is intended to make her forget the formality and deference she is expected to show towards him outside of their one-on-one meetings. This is not an innocent strategy on the Commander's part – he wants something from Offred and his behavioural choices during the performance he presents around her serve as a means to an end. This type of performative manipulation is succinctly explained by Goffman when he points out that "there are occasions when it serves the wider goals of the higher team to lower barriers and admit the lower team to

greater intimacy and equality with it. Granting the consequences of extending backstage familiarity to one's lesser, it may be in one's long-range interest to do so momentarily" (*Presentation* 126).

In order to put it into motion, the performance shared between Offred and the Commander has a "staging cue" associated to it. Every time the Commander wants Offred to sneak out of her room to meet him in his office late at night, he will have this request delivered by Nick, who makes sure he is seen by the Handmaid while performing his duties. The seemingly innocent position of the driver's hat is the signal which sets everything in motion, letting Offred know whether she is summoned for a meeting that night or not (236).

The first of their encounters is absolutely nerve-racking to Offred, as she is still trying to figure out the Commander's intentions towards her. When the Handmaid enters the office, she describes the Commander's pose as a studied performance not only to feign nonchalance but also as an act of superiority over her (213). In fact, besides the Commander's intentionally relaxed pose, Offred is surprised to hear him greet her with a simple "Hello" – a greeting from the time before which is no longer used in Gilead, as it has been replaced with the "Beatitudes". However, Offred quickly loses some of her nervousness when she realises that he does not intend to force himself upon her and, astonishingly, all that is asked of her is a game of Scrabble. Although this might seem like an innocent pastime, it is still a forbidden activity for her as a Handmaid and to Offred, it feels like a luxurious moment of freedom. In the face of this unexpected turn of events, Offred confesses she feels somewhat disappointed by how they spend the evening, as she expected something completely different to happen. She expected him to ask her for something sexually preserve, something from the time before which Gilead turned into a forbidden sin. Nonetheless, when it is time for Offred to go back to her room, the Commander takes this illicit encounter to a new degree of danger, asking Offred to kiss him "As if [she] meant it" (218). This final request

makes this “team-performance” even more perilous and delicate to deal with because this type of intimacy tends to make people’s behaviour change towards one another and slip-ups during a shared performance in front of an audience become harder to avoid. Here is a curious difference between the novel and the television adaptation, as the first encounter between Offred and the Commander ends with a handshake – it is not until their fifth encounter, on the sixth episode (“A Woman’s Place”) that he asks her to kiss him.

On their second encounter, besides the game of Scrabble and the goodnight kiss, the Commander offers Offred a women’s magazine, which is also an illegal offering, since Handmaids are not allowed to read. As such, although Offred badly wants to take the magazine, she does not let her “mask” fall, suspecting that he might just be testing her commitment to her role and the rules attached to it. In answer to her hesitation, the Commander assures her that in that “setting”, his office, she is allowed to read. As Offred takes the magazine, she realises that the Commander’s office is a sort of microcosm within Gilead, a place where he forsakes whichever rules do not serve his needs and where he reigns supreme with a set of rules of his own making. As Offred acknowledges, “Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved” (241). As a matter of fact, the very existence of the magazine is a crime that goes against Gilead’s norms and the fact that the Commander has it is just another confirmation that even he is not as honestly committed to his role as he should be. When Offred questions him about the magazine, which should have been burned, the Commander finds another opportunity to subtly remind her of how powerful he is, telling her that he is above the general man and, because of that, he is “beyond reproach” (242).

The third time they meet, Offred asks the Commander for hand lotion. He agrees to do as she asks, but he fears that his wife Serena might be able to smell the lotion on Offred and, consequently, become aware of their clandestine meetings. Offred wonders if this concern of his

is justified by an actual past experience, something he has learned from his past deviances. This means that the Commander has mastered how to perform the role of an adulterer who does not want to be caught. Indeed, Serena is probably the biggest threat to this “team-performance” and, as an audience member, it is of the utmost importance that she is not given any reason to suspect that her husband shares a “dark secret” with their Handmaid. On this meeting, it is also interesting to notice that the Commander does not seem distressed when Offred confesses that the Handmaids use butter or margarine to moisturize their hands and faces, having found a way to contradict Gilead’s rules; actually, he seems amused and laughs at their clever act of defiance – this angers Offred, because he discredits something that empowers the Handmaids, no matter how little, as if intentionally letting her know how futile and harmless to the power of Gilead these small insurgencies are.

Nevertheless, the Commander does stay true to his word and, during their fourth encounter, he brings Offred the hand lotion she requested. This meeting represents a step deeper into Offred and the Commander’s relationship, as it demonstrates how intimate they have become and, more importantly, how Offred is progressively starting to get comfortable around him. This growing intimacy is perfectly captured when the Commander attentively watches Offred apply the lotion as if it was a burlesque performance meant to please him. Adding to what has been discussed about the desiring gaze, this situation has some obvious voyeuristic undertones and can easily be seen as an example of Freud’s scopophilia – a concept which Davidsen briefly surmises, arguing that “scopophilia is one of the component instincts of sexuality that objectify a desired person by subjecting him or her to a controlling and observing gaze” (10). Actually, this voyeuristic side of the Commander happens not only when he watches Offred apply lotion, but also when he watches her commit the sin of reading – “While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it,

without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it . . . As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance” (286). Besides, recalling what has been previously said about the different types of gazes, this fascination of the Commander is an indisputable example of what Camilla Davidsen established as the desiring gaze, as it obviously makes Offred feel uncomfortable and, consequently, disempowered by his ogling.

The Ceremony of copulation is, for the Gilead patriarchy, the ultimate moment for the Handmaids, as it is the culmination of their duty in that society. Performing her duty, Offred lies on the bed, between Serena’s legs, holding her hands, while the Commander absentmindedly penetrates Offred. All three of them are doing their duty, playing their parts, none of them particularly enjoying themselves – it is all an act, a repetitive and mandatory performance required of all of them. Offred wonders which one of them suffers more from this ordeal: her or Serena, the Wife who openly despises Offred and mistreats her as soon as the Commander leaves the room when the Ceremony is over. While the Ceremony is meant to be a cold and unfeeling performance to all involved, this situation is unavoidably altered after Offred and the Commander establish their “team-performance” and get more comfortable around each other, meaning that these mandatory Ceremonies become a danger to the secret they are trying to keep hidden from Serena. Indeed, the first Ceremony after Offred and the Commander start seeing each other in secret proves that their relationship has significantly changed, precisely as a result of those encounters. Clearly, the Handmaid finds that she can no longer force herself to just do her duty by disconnecting herself from her body, as she did all the previous times. This time, due to the private intimacy shared with the Commander and the consequential alterations made to their relationship, Offred starts feeling self-conscious about the whole situation, even about her own body – feeling especially



embarrassed about her hairy legs and armpits. She can no longer stay indifferent to the Commander and the entire situation starts to feel “indecorous” and “uncouth” (247). Moreover, the Handmaid also confesses that these changes affect the way she feels not only towards the Commander but also towards Serena – even though Offred always hated the Wife she serves, sharing a secret with her husband makes Offred feel guilty; however, she also admits that having this shared secret with the Commander gives her some sort of power over Serena and it pleases her to know something which the Wife does not (249). About these changes in a social relationship, Goffman claims that they are an unavoidable stage for any “team-performance” and are actually important to boost trust between the “team-mates” who share it, since they help develop a sort of assurance, especially if the performance is based on a dangerous secret which can only be known to the participants:

... these shifts from apartness to intimacy occur at times of chronic strain ... Perhaps such lowering of barriers represents a natural phase in the social change which transforms one team into another: presumably opposing teams trade secrets so that they can start at the beginning to collect a new set of skeletons for a newly shared closet (*Presentation* 130).

Considering how much the relationship between Offred and the Commander has been altered, this Ceremony is a crucial moment for their “team-performance”, because their secret could easily be exposed by the subtlest of actions. Through the concept of “unmeant gestures”, which has been introduced before, Goffman analyses how dangerous it can be to get so comfortable with someone that it, unavoidably, leads to overstepping boundaries that should not be overstepped in front of an audience. In this case, Offred and the Commander actually do know the consequences, which makes it even more imperative that their performance does not raise suspicion. Be that as it may,

the Commander seems to be much more susceptible to forget himself and commit “unmeant gestures”, as he almost puts their performance in danger when, during the copulation, he unconsciously reaches to touch Offred’s face, something he has never done in any of their previous Ceremonies. This lapse of behaviour by the Commander is a perfect example of what Goffman means when he declares that “while a team-performance is in progress, any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct” (*Presentation 50*), as he almost betrays their shared secret with a movement that does not belong in the “setting” they are in at that moment. The fact that it is the Commander who puts their performance in danger clearly demonstrates that he is not as worried as Offred about the consequences it might bring about, because his social status frees him from having to constantly dread the consequences of his behaviour, even if it goes against the rules. On the matter of “team-performances” between people of different social positions, Goffman argues that the “team-mates” whose social statuses are unequal are easy to be established between people who find something they can depend on each other on – that *something* becomes more important than their social status’s differences and serves as a bridge between them, which allows a “team-performance” to be cohesive and prosper (*Presentation 50*).

This is obviously not entirely applicable to the “team-performance” shared by Offred and the Commander since she appears to be the only one who is aware of how important it is to restrain impulsive behaviour in front of their audience. The Commander proves he does not care for the differences between their social statuses, not because he is sympathetic to Offred’s situation, but due to the fact that he feels completely safe in his position of power, disregarding the consequences Offred could suffer on his account. Later, when they are alone and no longer in need to protect their secret from an audience who should not know about it, Offred openly reprimands the

Commander for endangering their “team-performance” in front of Serena, reminding him of the reprisals that would arise if their dissident behaviour was brought to light and made known to the rest of Gilead or even just to Serena. The unrestrained way Offred confronts the Commander is another example which serves to confirm that their relationship had already changed, due to their shared secret. By scolding the Commander, Offred shows that she has what Goffman describes as “presence of mind” – she is someone who can be trusted to save the “team-performance”, even when her accomplice slips up and threatens to drop their “front” before their audience, saving not only both the performers individually, but also the secret they share. As Goffman states:

A performer who is disciplined, dramaturgically speaking, is someone who remembers his part and does not commit unmeant gestures or faux pas in performing it. He is someone with discretion: he does not give the show away by involuntarily disclosing its secrets. He is someone with 'presence of mind' who can cover up on the spur of the moment for inappropriate behaviour on the part of his team-mates, while all the time maintaining the impression that he is merely playing his part (*Presentation* 137).

In truth, it becomes quite obvious that both Offred and the Commander get progressively more comfortable and relaxed around each other as these meetings go on, something which is particularly manifested through their body language. This gradual loss of formality between the two is perceptible when the Handmaid describes their demeanour in one of their later encounters, putting into evidence how informal and laid-back both of them have become. Asami Nakamura (11) offers an explanation as to why the Commander’s behaviour starts to change around Offred, arguing that his unceremonious demeanour is just another proof that he is completely aware he

does not need to prove his power to her, he is so sure of her powerlessness he can let himself drop his strict countenance because, even in a relaxed “setting” there is no questioning who holds the power. This implicates that he is completely aware of how differently he is acting towards her, but it seems that he simply does not mind showing her this side of him – probably because his powerful social status means that he will always overpower Offred, no matter how intimately she comes to know him. This puts into evidence the idea that the indisputable difference between their social status leads to an asymmetrical relationship between them – the Commander will always be the superordinate and Offred will always be the subordinate, meaning that she will never be able to take the same liberties he does towards her, because the consequences would not be the same, if any in his case (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* 64).

Nevertheless, Offred continuously wonders what the Commander stands to gain from these meetings, as she does not actually believe his kindness to be without price or that it can merely be paid with the goodnight kiss he demands of her at the end of every encounter. The culmination of these forbidden encounters happens when the Commander takes Offred to a secret night club called Jezebel’s, the Gileadean version of a brothel, where the high-ranking men of Gilead go to find pleasure. Although the Handmaid is scared of how dangerous this might be, she is also excited about doing something so unthinkable. Before they go out, the Commander orders Offred to change from her Handmaid’s robes into a scandalous feathery outfit, high heels and makeup (357). This change of outfit is obviously meant to alter her “personal front” (Goffman, *Presentation* 14) and allow her to step out of her role as a Handmaid and portray a whole different one for the evening. Moreover, to hide her true identity and get through the heavily guarded gates of Gilead, the Commander gives her a light blue cloak, which is the “status symbol” (Goffman, *Presentation* 24) attached to the Wives. This situation can be contemplated as a mockery of the

Wives' symbol, especially as it is ironically used to aid in the escapade of a cheating husband. Actually, besides the fact that Serena's cloak is used in a dissident manner, there are various other circumstances during this visit to Jezebel's that imply the perversion and scorning of the Wives' designated color. Apart from the cloak, there is also the mention of a "baby-blue laced-up Merry Widow" (375) which, according to Shannon Martin (49), "is significant in that not only is this the blue of the Wives, but it is also obviously the blue of babies, which are the ultimate goal of the Commander-Wife-Handmaid relationship. That the Wife's blue is used as the color of lingerie—which was ordered destroyed by the government—is an obvious perversion of the Wives' pseudo-virginity".

At Jezebel's, Offred is expected to play the role of an "evening rental" (361), marked with a purple tag on her wrist to indicate she is taken. She quickly realises that the club is a brothel, filled with women wearing all sorts of costumes that were considered sexy and appealing to men in the time before – lingerie, baby-doll pyjamas, bikinis, cheerleader's outfits, etc. They are expected to offer variety, to please every man's taste and cater to their sexual fantasies (Kauffman 235). Offred is no longer used to seeing women in such state of undress and struggles to keep her face from betraying her performance (364).

Unlike during the Ceremony, this time it is the Commander who takes initiative to save their performance when he notices Offred's stunned reaction and warns her not to stare. It is curious to notice that the Commander seems to be much more concerned about the possibility of having their secret discovered in this "setting" than he was during the Ceremony, when he almost revealed the truth with an "unmeant gesture" – this can only mean that the Commander fears the audience at Jezebel's a lot more than he fears Serena, probably because the men at the club are his equals and thus he has no power over them. In fact, Goffman presents a perfectly fitting

explanation to this behaviour on the Commander's part, when he is performing in front of other powerful men at Jezebel's:

He may want to save his own face because of his emotional attachment to the image of self which it expresses, because of his pride or honor, because of the power his presumed status allows him to exert over the other participants, and so on. He may want to save the others' face because of his emotional attachment to an image of them, or because he feels that his coparticipants have a moral right to this protection, or because he wants to avoid the hostility that may be directed toward him if they lose their face (*Interaction Ritual* 12).

After the Commander's warning, Offred becomes aware of her behaviour and the need to control it for the sake of their performance, lest she gives away their secret peccadillo. Just like that, Offred adjusts her behaviour and quickly falls into the role the Commander expects her to perform that evening – a plaything he wishes to show off in front of the other men. At the same time, he is showing himself off to Offred – he wants her to see how sly and powerful he is in this “setting” (365). The quick change of behaviour on Offred's part to avoid giving away her “team-performance” is a technique Goffman describes as “face-work”, which allows the individual to recover from a sudden and/or unexpected situation that affected their performance and threatens to cause them to lose their “mask” (*Interaction Ritual* 12).

It is by the end of their visit to Jezebel's that Offred finally understands what the Commander has been meaning to gain from their clandestine meetings, when he takes her to a room to “jump the gun” (394) on the Ceremony. Even though Offred is repulsed by him, this is what she has always expected him to truly want and she is soundly aware that she cannot refuse

his sexual advances, no matter how comfortable and permissive their relationship has become. It becomes clear that the Commander has been putting on a performance of his own in front of Offred throughout all of their encounters and all his pleasantries and concessions were actually just carefully calculated actions working towards a premeditated goal – to have sex with Offred outside of the obligatory Ceremony and without having to think about his wife’s presence. Goffman explains this type of manipulation used by the Commander on Offred, arguing that:

Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan (*Presentation 2*).

Furthermore, the sociologist also offers an explanation as to why Offred is incapable of denying the Commander what he wants, stating that “when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in a manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect” (*Presentation 6*). Obviously this corresponds to the fact that Offred owes the Commander blind obedience, due to the great gap that separates their respective social groups – he is all-powerful, she is powerless. Consequently, the Commander’s position in Gilead allows him to, as Goffman suggests, “expect” certain things. This is a type of bold confidence that is inherent to his role in Gileadean society and the possibility of

Offred not wanting to have sex with him outside of the Ceremony, an occasion when she is forced to accept it, is simply not an option that crosses his mind, especially after he put all that effort into a performance meant to woo her into accepting this situation without any sort of reluctance – in his mind, she owes him this and she should be thankful for his kindness; indeed, when Offred asks him why he brought her to a private room, he tells her it is for her enjoyment (395), as if he is trying to justify his actions during the entire evening, including the sexual intercourse, as a plan meant to please *her*, not him. With no power to resist what is demanded of her, Offred must put on the “mask” of a willing and lustful lover, a solo performance which must not betray the hatred and disgust she feels towards the Commander – “Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how. Let’s get this over with or you’ll be here all night. Bestir yourself. Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It’s the least you can do” (396).

#### 2.3.2.2 The Wife

Another unexpected “team-performance” is the one established between Offred and Serena Joy, the Wife she serves. At first glance, it might seem like these two characters have nothing in common and absolutely no reason to form an alliance with each other. In fact, it is Gilead’s goal to make sure these two women turn against each other and look at one another as the ultimate enemy. Nevertheless, Offred and Serena do have a common goal – to conceive a child. It is in order to achieve that goal that the Wife suggests that Offred should try to get pregnant by having sex with another partner, something that goes completely against the rules of Gilead.

After months of fruitless Ceremonies, Serena becomes desperate and decides to take matters into her own hands, even if it means that she has to disobey the directives she herself, as



one of the architects of Gilead, helped establish. Although it might be argued that Serena does sincerely want a child for maternal sentiment, the truth is that she needs Offred to fall pregnant and have a healthy child as soon as possible to keep appearances – she needs to show Gilead that she is not inferior to any other Wife and that the Commander is not incapable of reproducing. After what happened to their previous Handmaid, Serena is aware that her household has become somewhat discredited in the eyes of the other powerful families in Gilead and she fears how it will affect their own power if their lack of results continues for much longer. That being said, to Offred's surprise, Serena orders her to sleep with Nick, the household driver, whom she professes to be trustworthy.

When Serena proposes this arrangement to Offred, the Handmaid has the “presence of mind” to keep her performance as a devoted and dutiful Handmaid of Gilead, not wanting to risk the possibility of this being a test set up by the Wife to see how committed she is to her role. Without letting her “mask” fall, she reminds Serena that what she is suggesting is a crime which carries serious consequences. Only after she is sure Serena actually means what she is proposing, does Offred shift her demeanour towards the Wife. It shocks Offred to hear Serena suggest that their lack of results might be the Commander's fault, implying he is sterile. This insinuation surprises the Handmaid because there is no such thing as a sterile man in the eyes of Gilead, the fault is always the woman's and it is a crime to even suggest otherwise. Furthermore, this situation proves that the Wives are not as pious as they appear to be, as Serena confesses that using alternative approaches to get the Handmaids pregnant is something most Wives do (314-315). It is important to keep in mind that Serena was one of the original architects of Gilead and to see her change from a true-believer to someone who trespasses the ideology she helped create shows how unhappy she is actually is with the result of what she helped build – most likely, she is disappointed

by how reduced her role in society ended up being, as she went from a passionate public speaker to a silenced and passive housewife. As Pettersson (16) asserts: “Serena Joy has been transformed from a ‘collaborator’ to a woman who seemingly regrets her choices in life which led her to lose the power of expressing her opinions”. It is interesting to notice that Serena makes sure to use a “setting” favourable to herself when she approaches Offred. Indeed, the only place that belongs thoroughly to the Wives is their gardens, as gardening is considered a women’s activity. Consequently, Serena knows she is relatively safe from any spies when she makes her rebellious proposal by calling Offred into the garden, in order to converse in a “setting” she dominates. Obviously, Serena only proposes this arrangement because she is certain Offred will agree to it – the Wife is desperate, but the Handmaid is also running out of time to fulfil her duty in the household and if she does not become pregnant soon, she might be punished for failing at the role she has been given, risking losing her status as a Handmaid and being sent to the Colonies after being deemed an Unwoman. All things considered, unless they get caught, both women will benefit from this forbidden cooperation.

Just as it happened with the Commander, this is another “team-performance” where Offred is outranked by a “team-mate” with whom she shares a “dark secret”. However, the significant difference is that Serena, being a woman, is almost as powerless as Offred. Even though she is a Wife, a status that grants her superiority over all other women in Gilead, her power only goes as far as keeping the household running and disciplining the individuals who work there. In the grand scheme of things, both women end up being equally oppressed and powerless when compared to the men of Gilead. Thereupon, while the Commander has no fear of the consequences that might come out of his transgressions, due to his gender and powerful position in society, Serena cannot count on such security. Because of that, it is even harder for Offred and Serena to fully trust each

other than it was for Offred and the Commander. Both of them have reasons to dislike each other and they are aware that if either of them were to disclose their secret, they would both be at risk – not even Serena can say she would be immune to Gilead’s “justice”. To compensate for that lack of trust, Serena seeks to assure Offred’s loyal cooperation by promising to give her a picture of her daughter, who was forcefully taken from her when she became a Handmaid. Moreover, as a show of good faith, Serena commits another transgression when she gives Offred a cigarette and tells her to ask Martha for a match to light it with. This promise and offering are small showings of power on the Wife’s part to remind Offred that although they share a common goal, they are not equals – whatever little power she has, it still triumphs over Offred’s absolute powerlessness.

The collusion created between these two women can be considered an example of what Goffman designates as “double-talk” (*Presentation* 124), which is inherent to “team-performances” which have the particularity of not involving the aspect of mutual solidarity or trust expected to exist between the individuals who share a performance, they simply work together as a means to an end; in fact, because these performances are established between individuals who are known to be “enemies”, it is of the utmost importance to keep that appearance in front of their audience, in order to conceal the fact that they are working together. This “double-talk” is particularly visible in the television adaptation, as Serena’s demeanour towards Offred changes drastically whenever she suspects the Handmaid might be pregnant. While Offred’s period is late and there is a chance she might be pregnant, Serena treats her with kindness and warmth – “You’re my miracle. My beautiful miracle” (Season 1, “Late” 00:47:01-00:47:09), she tells Offred. Nevertheless, as soon as the Handmaid confesses she is not pregnant, the Wife’s behaviour changes, her “mask” falls as she aggressively drags Offred to her bedroom and threatens her. This actually leads to a performance by Offred, who puts on a “mask” of a submissive and repenting

Handmaid to get what she wants from Serena, which proves she knows exactly how to adapt her performance to get through to her audience – “Mrs. Waterford, I know I failed you. I... I disappointed you and myself. And I will do my best to not let it happen again. I’ve learned my lesson. I’m so sorry. Please let me out” (Season 1, “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” 00:22:35-00:23:00).

This unlikely “team-performance” comes to an end when Serena finds lipstick on the blue cloak Offred wore to Jezebel’s and confronts the Handmaid about it. Curiously, the Wife seems to truly be hurt by Offred’s deception (441). To Offred’s credit, she once again shows a considerable “presence of mind” and does not drop the “mask” of a dutiful Handmaid, even though she confesses she feels guilty of this situation. After their confrontation, Serena orders Offred to go to her room and, in there, Offred considers all kinds of ways she could escape Serena’s wrathful punishment – setting the house on fire, using the match given to her on Serena’s orders; try to break the shatterproof window; go to the Commander and beg for his protection; hang herself with her bed sheet; attack and kill Serena Joy; or run to Nick’s room. However, in the end, she does not do any of those things. Interestingly, while the novel has Serena blame Offred for her husband’s transgressions, the adaptation shows the Wife brazenly confronting the Commander about his behaviour. While it has already been mentioned that the television version of Offred is a lot more rebellious than the original protagonist, the same can be said about Serena, as the televised version of her is a lot more openly subversive and unhappy with her role as a silenced housewife. For example, proof of Serena’s rebelliousness is shown when she confronts Commander Fred about Offred’s supposed pregnancy, defiantly telling him the baby is not his – “You’re weak, and God would never let you pass on that weakness. You can’t father a child because you’re not worthy” (Season 1, “Night” 00:15:54-00:16:02).

### 2.3.2.3 The best friend

One of the most important “team-performances” for Offred is the one she shares with Moira, her best friend from the time before, as the dynamic between these two characters is completely different from every other “team-performance” that Offred establishes throughout the novel. In truth, having Moira in Gilead with her is one of the factors that allow Offred to stay sane and not let herself be completely immersed by the regime’s ideological indoctrination – not only does Moira push Offred into commit some dissident acts, she also acts as a beacon of hope for Offred due to her seemingly unbreakable rebellious spirit, which is a complete opposite to Offred’s own personality. In fact, from the moment Moira is brought into the Red Center, she gives off a sensation of defiance. Offred recalls that she was bruised, which probably means that Moira resisted being brought to Gilead, meaning that she was fighting against the patriarchal theocracy even before she was imprisoned by it.

The fact that Offred and Moira have a past relationship is something that they must keep hidden from Gilead at all costs, because they would be considered a hindrance to each other’s indoctrination – they are a tether to the lives they had before, lives which Gilead wants them to forget and leave behind entirely, in order to become what the new society wants them to be. Consequently, the fact that they have a past together becomes their “dark secret”, an information which they must keep only between them and protect through a credible “team-performance”. As Offred recounts: “Friendships were suspicious” (110). Because of this solidified intimacy between these two characters, who have known each other for most of their lives, the “team-performance” they establish with one another is one which can be classified under Davidsen’s egalitarian gaze – although they are very different from one another in terms of personality, they are the same in the

eyes of Gilead, just two powerless and fertile women with only the purpose of breeding healthy children for the elite.

Offred and Moira defy the rules of Gilead by using their bathroom breaks to be alone with each other and talk across toilet stalls. They orchestrate their encounters through an arranged “staging cue” – asking to go to the washroom at a strategic time when they know they have fewer chances of being denied permission. It is during one of these breaks that Moira tells Offred she means to escape Gilead by pretending to be sick, so an ambulance will have to come to pick her up and take her to a hospital. Offred tries to dissuade her from this idea, fearful that she will get caught. More importantly, Offred confesses that what truly terrifies her is the possibility of not having Moira with her in Gilead, in case she gets caught (140). Moira’s plan almost works – she is taken away with a case of appendicitis, but is brought back to the Red Center and brutally punished for her defiance, being beaten with steel cables on her hands and feet so badly that she could not walk for a week afterwards (143). Curiously, this part of the novel was completely changed in the television version. Instead of Moira, it is Offred who is severely beaten as a punishment after they both try to escape to Boston through the subway. This moment is a true testament to their friendship and the trust which serves as the foundation of their “team-performance” because, in the end, only Moira manages to get on the train, as Offred is approached by Guardians and lets herself be taken away by them to protect and give Moira the time she needs to get aboard. That being said, this is one of those situations which clearly prove how much more actively this Offred tries to escape Gilead, considering how the original Offred never actually takes a chance at attempting to leave and, when the chance is presented to her, she hesitates and avoids it.

Nevertheless, even after her punishment, Moira does not give in to fear and remains focused on escaping, never becoming complacent with her oppression. Proof of this is the fact that she tries to escape a second time by overflowing a toilet and threatening to kill Aunt Elizabeth, who went inside the cubicle to fix it, with a sharp piece of the toilet she dismantled herself. Moira does, in fact, manage to leave Gilead by disguising herself as an Aunt, with the clothes she forces Aunt Elizabeth to strip out of. In this situation, Moira falls into another role and puts on a different “mask” to deceive the guards –aided by the Aunt’s status symbols and the enactment of a stiff body posture. She adapted herself to the situation through a disguise, becoming an Aunt because knew the older women’s status meant that no one would question her behaviour (205). Moira’s success in evading Gilead becomes a sort of legend among the other Handmaids and her insurgency serves to disempower the Aunts in their eyes, chipping away a bit of whatever little power Gilead has given the older women.

After her escape, there is no more news of Moira until Offred finds her at Jezebel’s, the brothel the Commander takes her during their clandestine night out. Offred is both shocked and happy to see Moira but hides her recognition in front of the Commander, to avoid betraying their “team-performance”. In place of the red dress she wore as a Handmaid, Moira’s new role has her wearing a scandalous outfit, one that Offred realises is a symbol from the time before but fails to associate it to the iconic outfit of the Playboy bunnies, which was probably the imagery Margaret Atwood intended to evoke. In her new role, that type of outfit is Moira’s new “status symbol”, marking her “personal front” role and identifying her as a prostitute. Once the two friends see each other across the night club, Moira uses their old “staging cue” to meet each other in the bathrooms, just as they did when they were both Handmaids – “her hand rests in the air a moment, all five fingers outspread . . . Our old signal. I have five minutes to get to the women’s washroom” (371).

Their escape into the women's bathroom at Jezebel's is a moment of what Goffman calls "backstage". Indeed, as soon as the two women step into the bathroom, they let their "masks" fall and are free to relax, talk more openly and be themselves, which, according to Goffman, is the exact function of this "backstage":

Very commonly the back region of a performance is located at one end of the place where the performance is presented, being cut off from it by a partition and guarded passageway. By having the front and back regions adjacent in this way, a performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation (*Presentation* 69).

Regardless, being traumatized by Gilead's constant vigilance, Offred worries that the bathroom might be under surveillance; however, Moira assures her that it most likely is not, either because the men in power do not care for what they have to say or simply because they fear nothing from these women who, officially, do not even exist and whose only chance of leaving the brothel is when they die or are sent to the Colonies – either way, they will not have the opportunity to tell anyone of importance whatever secrets they might know (376). It is during their moment "backstage" that Moira tells Offred how she became a prostitute, after being caught and deemed too insubordinate to return to Gilead and reprise her role as a Handmaid. Moreover, she seems to be actually pleased with the benefits of her new role at Jezebel's, telling Offred she should try to be relieved of her duty as a Handmaid and join her at the brothel, since it allows them privileges the Handmaids are completely forbidden to experience. Hearing Moira argue in favour of her situation at Jezebel's frightens Offred, who does not recognize her friend as someone who would give herself to indifference and conformity. She admits she does not want Moira to become like



her, compliant to what is strictly set before her. This passiveness on Moira's part is disheartening to Offred and it is almost as if she loses a source of strength and courage, which is what Moira represented, not only for Offred but also to the other Handmaids in general – "I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (387).

Nevertheless, a deeper analysis of this situation brings forward the idea that this change of role does not necessarily signify that Moira gave up and lost the power of making her own decisions. Proof of this is the fact that becoming a Jezebel's prostitute was a choice she confesses she made – she is a survivor who is aware that choosing the Colonies would lead to her death much sooner than choosing the brothel, considering all the amenities it offers. Having said that, even though Moira is not free to be herself and is obligated to play another role in this new "setting" – a prostitute at Jezebel's – it is a role she actually chose to perform of her own free will. Accordingly, this new situation Moira finds herself in should not be seen as a total defeat of her spirit. As Stillman and Johnson (80) point out: "The last we ever see of Moira she is imprisoned, defeated but still defiant. Gilead is not within her".

Moira is the prime example of a dissident character, who refuses to accept the strict rules that try to dictate what she is supposed to be and, because of that, Aunt Lydia deems her a "cunning and dangerous woman" (204). Her irreverence was there even before Gilead came to be, during the events that lead to it. Just like Offred's mother, she was an activist who fought hard for women's rights. The fact that Moira refuses at all costs to be told what to do and what to be is what separates her from Offred. While Offred falls into her role as a Handmaid with relative compliance, Moira fights it right from the start, for as long as she can, and although she ends up in a situation that can be considered oppressive in one way or another, she is still not letting anyone makes decisions for her. The encounter at Jezebel's is the last time Offred and Moira see each other and

thus ends their “team-performance” and all the information provided on what happened to Moira from then on. After that, all Offred can do is speculate what might have happened to her best friend:

I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time . . . I’d like to say she blew up Jezebel’s, with fifty Commanders inside it. I’d like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn’t happen. I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again (388).

This is something which is also very different in *Hulu’s* adaptation. In the television series, what happens between Offred and Moira at Jezebel’s is a moment which goes against what is defined for the two characters in the novel, because it is Offred who is being completely subversive in this scenario, risking her life to spy for the rebel organization while Moira thinks she is insane for acting as a spy and refuses to help her – their roles are reversed, turning Offred into the most rebellious of the two. Unlike the novel, it is Offred who has to beg Moira to be less passive and fight Gilead’s rules – “Moira, do not... Do not let them grind you down. You keep your fucking shit together. You fight” (Season 1, “The Bridge” 00:31:55-00:32:05). In the end, Offred’s exhortation seems to be effective because, soon after, Moira kills a man, escapes Jezebel’s and successfully manages to cross the border into Canada, proving she is actually just as courageously rebellious as her literary counterpart.

#### 2.3.2.4 The fellow Handmaid

Apart from her “team-performance” with Moira, which is special in terms of their shared past, there is only one other Handmaid with whom Offred gets close enough to initiate a meaningful “team-performance” – Ofglen, her partner for the prescriptive daily walks all Handmaids must take. Even though the two women do not trust each other at first, they eventually come to the understanding that neither of them is truly invested in their role and that proves to be a determinant bonding factor for them.

Unsurprisingly, both Offred and Ofglen are very suspicious of one another at the start of their relationship. When they are partnered, neither of them trusts each other in the slightest and, because of that, both of them act as piously as possible, making a show of how committed they are to being Handmaids of Gilead. As a consequence, during their initial strolls not much more than innocent cordial lines and the customary “Beatitudes” is exchanged between them. This wariness on the Handmaids part is completely understandable, considering they are strangers to each other, forcefully brought together by a society where nobody can truly be trusted. According to Goffman, this type of behaviour is commonly experienced between people who engage in social interactions, but are not intimate enough to trust one another with their true selves without first knowing for sure there is no danger in doing so. While they are not sure whether to trust each other, the individuals will gradually engage in “disclosive communication”, letting his guard down a bit at time, according to the reactions he gets from the other individual – if the reactions indicate receptiveness, a bond of trust is established (Goffman, *Presentation* 122).

It is not until Ofglen takes a risk and, after changing their usual route, leads Offred to stand in front of Soul Scrolls, where prayers are printed and sold as merchandise, to ask Offred if she believes God listens to the machines printing those prayers. Offred is shocked by the question and considers keeping her “mask” of pious true-believer, in case this is a test (258). However, Offred

also decides to take a risk in that moment and truthfully deny her belief, an admission which is considered a crime in the eyes of Gilead. It is after this shared moment of heresy that they truly establish a “team-performance”, which is strengthened by the fact that this is the first time they actually look at each other in the face. It is this look that truly consolidates the fact that these two Handmaids share an egalitarian gaze. As it was stated previously, these two characters empower each other through their shared status and a false sense of duty towards the society that oppresses them. The fact that Ofglen chooses to stop in front of Soul Scrolls to initiate a more intimate and subversive conversation with Offred is not an arbitrary choice. She is aware that this is a place where suspicion over them would be lessened because to anyone watching them it looks like they’ve just stopped to pray (259). This means that Ofglen is cleverly taking advantage of the Handmaids’ prescribed piety and turning something Gilead encourages against Gilead itself. This strategy is what Erving Goffman calls “dramatization of the work”, a technique used by the individual to draw attention to whatever part of his performance he wishes to be noticed by his audience (*Presentation* 19-20). In this case, Ofglen’s goal is to perform in a way that highlights their piety and, in doing so, she manages to deceive those who are eager to believe in it. It is interesting to notice that the way Ofglen conducts their blasphemous conversation shows that she has experience in sneaking around Gilead, which proves that she is an actively subversive character. Proof of this is the fact that she tries to recruit Offred to join the rebel group she is a part of – Mayday. Obviously, Ofglen only reveals the existence of this rebellious group after she is completely sure Offred is willing to go against Gilead. It was precisely with the intention of confirming this willingness that Ofglen first questions Offred about her beliefs. Her questions function as a social approach that Goffman designates as “putting out feelers”. In the words of the Canadian-American sociologist: “By means of statements that are carefully ambiguous or that

have a secret meaning to the initiate, a performer is able to discover, without dropping his defensive stand, whether or not it is safe to dispense with the current definition of the situation” (*Presentation* 121) – this is exactly what Ofglen does by asking if the other Handmaid believes if God listens to the machines printing prayers, a question relatively inconspicuous and innocent enough to be forgivable if Offred revealed herself to be a true believer. Ofglen “puts out a feeler” more than once, before trusting Offred – she inserts the password “May day” in a weather comment she throws at Offred during one of their walks. Because Offred is not aware of the significance of this signal yet, she does not react and Ofglen realises she is not part of the resistance – after Offred does know about Mayday, Ofglen warns her not to use the password recklessly, for their own protection (310).

When Ofglen tells Offred about Mayday, their “team-performance” turns a lot more dangerous, because they start sharing an “inside” secret which is not only “dark”, but also “strategic”. On the one hand, their “dark secret” is their false commitment to their common role and the knowledge that the other is not a true believer and does not perform her duties willingly, a piece of information which they must trust each other not to divulge. On the other hand, their “strategic” secret is the fact that they know of the existence of Mayday– not only do they know of it, they are part of it. This can be considered a “strategic secret”, because if Gilead learned about the existence of an organized resistance operating inside their society, those in power would adapt to that reality and, doubtlessly, do everything they could to find those who are part of it, which would put all of Mayday’s operations in jeopardy. Furthermore, because they are actually members of Mayday, that “dark” and “strategic” secret turns into an “inside” secret, since their status as members of the rebellious organization grants them knowledge not many other people have, they are “in the know”, as Goffman puts it (*Presentation* 88) – for example, something that marks this

“inside” secret is the fact that Ofglen shares Mayday’s password with Offred, bringing her into a group of selected few who are able to recognize it as a signal.

The two Handmaids quickly develop a routine during their walks, taking a strategic path on their way back home that allows them to talk a bit more freely. Nevertheless, Offred constantly feels threatened by Gilead’s oppressing vigilance. She admits that there is no way to speak freely, even on their premeditated route they must be careful and avoid drawing suspicion and, because of that, they have to speak in hushed tones and almost in code, turning every conversation into “amputated speech” (309). This lack of opportunity for actual conversations leads to the loss of meaning because everything is rushed and only “half-said” (DiBenedetto 51), which means that this “amputated speech” presents a serious risk of turning Offred and Ofglen’s subversive conversations into meaningless exchanges. This “team-performance” does turn out to be quite unproductive and the fault of that falls mostly on Offred – she starts to distance herself from the other Handmaid when Ofglen tells her that Mayday is aware she is meeting her Commander in secret and they want her to report back all the information she can gather during these meetings. Out of fear, and some might argue cowardice, Offred is very hesitant about this request and ends up not revealing any sort of intelligence on the Commander to the resistance. As a result, Ofglen starts to dissociate, questioning Offred’s commitment to the cause and their “team-performance”. While Offred actually realises her partner is aggrieved by her passive behaviour, instead of trying to make things right, she admits feeling relieved over losing the burden of having people depend on her to deliver information (416), something which adds to the argument that Offred does not actively perform as a heroine who seeks to become free of her oppressors.

The “team-performance” between the two Handmaids comes to an end when Offred gets a new shopping partner, a new Ofglen. Wary of this new companion, Offred greets her with the

“Beatitudes” and, after trying and failing to “put out a feeler” by using the “May day” password with her, she carefully asks what happened to her former partner. The new Ofglen tells her learns that the old Ofglen killed herself after the Salvaging when she saw the black van coming to take her. This is after she leads the attack on the man at the Particicution, the one she tells Offred was an agent of Mayday. This means that leading the attack was a bad choice on Ofglen’s part because it put her under suspicion and made her “lose face” – it was not exactly an “unmeant gesture”, but it was enough of an out of character behaviour that it led to the exposure of her subversive self. After learning this information, Offred’s greatest concern is whether Ofglen broke under torture and named her as someone who has knowledge of Mayday. Again, all Offred feels is relief over the fact that her former “team-mate” hanged herself before she could be tortured and, therefore, did not get her into trouble (440). Ofglen proves to be a very trustworthy “team-mate”, not only when she kills herself for the cause, but also when gives the Mayday agent a quick death during the Particicution – she makes the ultimate sacrifice in favour of the secrets she keeps and the people involved in them. She is the perfect example of the two perspectives Goffman claims must coexist in any performance: a “defensive orientation”, to protect the individual’s own performance, and a “protective orientation”, to help their “team-mates” maintain their performance (*Interaction Ritual* 14). Ofglen not only puts into action both of these perspectives, she also proves to be able to put them into motion at the same time when she initiates the attack on her fellow Mayday comrade and when she kills herself.

Because the television series has Offred as a much more openly subversive character, the “team-performance” between these two Handmaids is inevitably different in the adaptation. The most straightforward difference is the fact that Offred is much more open to Ofglen’s rebellious advances and Mayday’s requests. Unlike what happens in the novel, when Ofglen is taken, it is

Offred who proves to be worthy of her “team-mate’s” trust, after she is interrogated about her partner’s gender treachery, which is what Gilead designates as the crime of homosexuality. During the interrogation, Offred remains defiant even after she is gets shocked by Aunt Lydia’s cattle prod for using the word “gay” and brutally beaten for admitting she did not report knowing about Ofglen’s sexual preferences because she was her friend. Moreover, when Ofglen comes back from where they tried to “fix” her, she performs as a broken-down Handmaid who has learned her lesson; however, this is all a premeditated performance, as she proves she is still a rebellious character by stealing a car and running over a Guardian as what is meant as a sacrifice to arouse dissidence among the other Handmaids and motivate them to act against their oppressors.

#### 2.3.2.5 The driver

The “team-performance” which ultimately has the most impact on Offred is, arguably, the one she establishes with Nick, the driver assigned to the Waterford household. As it has been mentioned before, this relationship happens because Serena Joy sets up an encounter between the two of them, in order to try and conceive a child. Although this was supposed to be a one-time thing, Offred and Nick start seeing each other on a regular basis, secretly meeting almost every night in his room.

Truthfully, all throughout the novel, there is something connecting these two characters, even before Serena asks Offred to sleep with him. For example, the first time Offred recounts seeing Nick, he boldly looks her in the face and winks at her, something which shocks the Handmaid and forces her to adapt her performance to save her own face, forcing herself to remain impassive and not let herself show any reaction to his goading. She ponders whether he is an Eye



and this unexpected behaviour is a test to see if she would respond with an action deemed unsuited to her social role, in an incriminatory manner (Goffman, *Presentation* 29). In fact, there are various moments where it can be seen that there is something unexplainably intimate between the Handmaid and the driver, even if they never actually share a full conversation or a single moment alone. Nevertheless, it is only after they begin their love affair that they truly become a “team-performance” who share a “dark secret” which must be kept hidden from their audience, especially from the Commander and the Wife they both serve. In this case, evoking Davidsen’s different types of gazes again, it is interesting to notice that both Offred and Nick look at each other through a “desiring gaze” – this is a first for the Handmaid, who is used to only having this type of gaze directed at her and not experiencing it herself towards someone else.

Their first time alone, when they are set up by Serena’s orders, proves to be an awkward situation for both of them. They experience what Goffman designates as a “feeling of discomfiture”, which “seems always to be unpleasant, but the circumstances that arouse it may have immediate pleasant consequences for the one who is discomfited” (*Interaction Ritual* 101). Clearly, they have already grown unaccustomed to sexual encounters and how to approach its preliminaries. They are so uncomfortable in this situation, which has been forced upon them, that they feel like they must wear a new “mask” that will fit this performance; more importantly, they are aware that this is a performance and, although they do not have an audience present, they must still act in a way that corresponds to what Serena expects of them, because she expects a factual outcome – a pregnancy. They find themselves mimicking cheesy pickup lines and quoting old movies from the past to make themselves fall into their performance (404). This imitation and repetition of old movie quotes reinforces the idea that both Offred and Nick are aware that this encounter is not a frivolous rendezvous and they know what is expected of each of them as a man

and as a woman; this means that, at least at first, their relationship is based and put into motion by gender expectations, as they are paired up by Serena only because of what their gender could offer. Because of that, all they expected from each other was a behaviour which fit their gender. Kirkvik looks upon Offred and Nick's first meeting through the lenses of Judith Butler's argument that gender is something which is learned through observation and mimicking, which is why they resort to movie lines fitting their genders in situations similar to the one they find themselves in:

Offred's insistence on repeating and mimicking old romance tropes and clichés emphasizes the performance that goes into her relationship with Nick in the sense that the way she acts is the way that is expected of her according to these stories. By mimicking pre-existing scenarios and ways of speaking, Offred illustrates Butler's later claim that gender is the repetition of acts that precedes the performer. In this case we see the repetition, once again a very literal and purposeful repetition, of gestures, behavior and speech fits this argument quite nicely, though Atwood utilizes the repetition in a way that acknowledges the performance at the same time as it problematizes the idealization of heteronormative gender roles (65).

Interestingly, during their first time, Nick warns Offred to not expect romance from him, something which she understands as a "no strings attached" caution. Nevertheless, this ultimately proves to be an empty warning, as Offred goes back to his room and they continue meeting each other, so frequently that they develop a kind of ritual (412). It is during these clandestine rendezvous that Offred lets her true self show and the more intimate she gets with Nick, the more she reveals about herself. In his company, Offred does not feel like she needs to put on a "mask" and act according to a set of expectations, she feels free to be herself and she trusts him with the

knowledge of who she truly is. While he says nothing about himself, she tells him everything about her past and even reveals her true name. This revelation is arguably, a liberating action on Offred's part, a step against the oppressive patriarchy that took her name from her – by disclosing her name to Nick, she takes another step towards rebellion against a regime that aims to bury who she used to be. Offred falls in love with Nick and he becomes a safe haven for her, a lifeline that gives her strength to survive the horrors of Gilead and makes all her suffering worth it (413). Moreover, although she knows this is a relationship that could lead them both to their deaths if they were ever discovered, Offred does not mind the risk. To the Handmaid, this relationship with Nick, however precarious and ephemeral it might be, is the only thing she has in this society that took everything from her. For all of Offred's faith in Nick, he never seems to reciprocate it in full. Actually, he seems to distrust her ability to keep their "team-performance" a secret and ability to perform convincingly in front of their audience, as if he is afraid her feelings for him will make her have less "presence of mind" and aloof to how dangerous their relationship is, potentially making her "slip up". This means that the two of them are not equally invested in their "team-performance", considering the fact that, apparently, Offred is much more willing to trust and sacrifice herself for her "team-mate". Arguably, Offred's willingness to belief in Nick comes from the fact that she does not have anything else to devote herself to, this relationship is the only thing she can invest in because she chose to, through her own free will, and he is one of the very few people she does not have to perform in a way that hides her true self. The same cannot be said for Nick, as he seems to be invested in balancing a few performances, all of which require him to adapt his self to the setting he is in – whether it is the driver who keeps the Commander's secrets, the driver who keeps Serena's secrets, the Mayday spy, or the Handmaid's lover.

The culmination of Offred and Nick's "team-performance" happens when the Handmaid falls pregnant. This means that, in a way, their performance is completely successful and the role which had been given to them by Serena Joy has been fulfilled. Offred's willingness to stay and accept her life in Gilead is never more evident than when she realises she is carrying Nick's child and immediately starts imagining how they could keep on living just as they were, meeting in secret and serving in the household their child would be raised in (415). However, their "team-performance" is tested when Offred is confronted by Serena Joy, after the Wife discovers she was meeting the Commander in secret. After Offred is sent to her room, where she despairingly considers her options to escape Serena's punishment, including suicide, it is Nick who comes to her rescue. At this moment, he seems to let Offred see his true self and, contrary to what might have been assumed by his past cold affections in contrast to her blatant feelings, he seems to truly care for her safety. When Nick enters her room, Offred's first thought is that he is an Eye and that he has betrayed her, which means that, in truth, she does not trust him completely. Nevertheless, she does suspend her distrust when he calls her by her true name and asks her to go with the men in the van, claiming they are part of Mayday and it was him who called for them before Serena could punish her. Having said that, the end of this "team-performance" coincides with the end of Offred's tale, as she stops her narration as she steps into the black van and into an uncertain rescue. When it comes to the televised version of Offred and Nick's relationship, a noticeable divergence from the original is actually found in Nick's performance towards Offred – while he mostly seems a taciturn and relatively cold character in the book right until the end, in the series he is a lot more loving and honest towards Offred right from the start of their "team-performance". Indeed, he seems to honestly be in love with the Handmaid, considering how he actually adapts his

performance as a double-agent to constantly warn her about possible dangers and risks his own life to protect and ultimately rescue her.

This “team-performance” is probably one of the most discussed aspects of Offred’s story. There seems to be some dissonance among scholars when it comes to interpreting the consequences of the affair between Offred and Nick – while some argue that this relationship only makes Offred more passive and complacent towards her oppression, while others defend that this “team-performance” is Offred’s ultimate rebellion against Gilead and the only thing that allows her to reclaim possession over her own self in a society that tried to erase it completely. On the one hand, one of the strongest arguments against this relationship is made by Stillman and Johnson (76), who blame Nick’s influence for the deepening of Offred’s resignation and acceptance of what Gilead wants her to be, a mere body. On the other hand, Victoria Glendinning argues that this “team-performance” shows how powerful the “subversive force of love” (qtd. in Roschman 63) is against Gilead, as they actually manage to deceive the regime by keeping their affair a secret and, more importantly, as Nick uses his rebellious connections to save his lover and “team-mate”.

### 3. Conclusion

Considering that the aim of this dissertation was to question how well Goffman’s Dramaturgy can be applied to the characters’ social interaction in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it seems that everyone in Gilead is indeed highly aware that they have a role to play, with rules and consequences inherent to each of their performances and masks. Under the constant scrutiny of a dictatorial society, there is little chance to act freely, without thinking of the strict norms imposed by those in power and the repercussions that might arise from breaking those rules. All behaviour

that goes against the established regulation is done undercover and in secrecy, while at the same time maintaining a performance that looks completely acceptable and unsuspecting to the audience who keeps the performers under scrutiny. This secrecy is what allows life in Gilead to go on in harmony, even if it is all a farce. To achieve and keep that harmony, the individual must conceal his true feelings and beliefs, at least while in the presence of an audience who does not share them or, even more so, when that audience is completely against them (Goffman, *Presentation* 4). As it has been demonstrated, this is what the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* do – they hide their true beliefs and expectations, only revealing them to individuals whom they trust, their “team-mates”, and mostly only when in a “backstage” setting.

It is important to reinforce the idea that the Handmaids are the characters who suffer most from this dictatorial social role attribution. They are the social group with the most expectations associated with it, as the role imposed upon them makes their entire household depend on her to give them a child, which is a considerable burden to bear. Consequently, their role is one of the strictest ones in all of the novel, especially considering that they are separated from the rest of the society, only keeping the company of another Handmaid for a few moments during a mandatory walk to do the daily shopping. As Asami Nakamura (15) suggests, “in Gilead, the Handmaids are deprived of subjectivity, living as ‘void’ until they conceive the Commander’s child”, meaning that they have nothing else to live for other than to bear a healthy baby – that is the great purpose of their role and everything about their performance must specifically work towards fulfilling that ultimate purpose. However, even after being submitted to a severe indoctrination at the Red Centre, the Handmaids continuously find subversive ways to go around what Gilead dictates for their role. Regardless, they do strive to fulfil their duty and perform their role integrally, if for no other reason than the fact that their lives literally depend on it. Nevertheless, the fact is that most of them are

unhappy with their role and what is expected of them and, because of that, they learn to repress their true feelings, keep them for “backstage” and moments when they know they can be subversive without being caught or endangering their performances – as it happens during the Birth Day, the Prayvaganza and the Salvaging. These “backstage” performances are actually very important throughout the entire novel, especially for the women, as it represents a space where “masks” can be more or less forgotten and all performances more relaxed because they are among “equals”. Simone de Beauvoir describes how important this “backstage” activity is for women, particularly when there are no men in the audience or among them:

What gives value to such relations among women is the truthfulness they imply. Confronting man woman is always play-acting; she lies when she makes believe that she accepts her status as the inessential other, she lies when she presents to him an imaginary personage through mimicry, costumery, studied phrases. These histrionics require a constant tension: when with her husband, or with her lover, every woman is more or less conscious of the thought: ‘I am not being myself;’ the male world is harsh, sharp edged, its voices are too resounding, the lights are too crude, the contacts rough. With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment, but not in battle; she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics; she is lingering in dressing-gown and slippers in the wings before making her entrance on the stage; she likes this warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere (qtd. in Goffman, *Presentation* 69).

An obvious example that illustrates this statement by Simone de Beauvoir is the bathroom scene between Offred and Moira at Jezebel’s. The fact is that there is an undeniable difference to their demeanour as soon as they leave the lounging area and move into the bathroom – this is because

they move from a “setting” where they are the object of the male’s desiring gaze and, therefore, must be highly aware of their performances, into a secluded “setting” where there are no men and all the women around them are not an audience they need to impress or convince that they are truly invested in their role.

As mentioned before, Offred’s status as a heroine is one of the most controversial subjects for scholars who delve into *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Indeed, the truth is that Offred behaves in a way that ultimately turns her into what Gilead wants her to be. Even though she engages in some dissident behaviour and breaks a few rules, she is too terrified to actively undermine the patriarchal dictatorship. This is why she is recurrently compared to other insurgent female characters, such as Moira, her mother, and Ofglen, all of them women who refuse to surrender, unlike Offred (Pettersson 12). While Offred is wholly involved in subversive “team-performances” with people who have substantial power, as she is when Commander and Serena involve her in dangerous illegal circumstances, she is fearful to truly be invested in Mayday and the acts of rebellion Ofglen asks her to perform. This happens because Offred fears the consequences of failing to perform in accordance to what those who have more power than her expect, but she does not fear dropping her “mask” and slacking her performance in front of an audience like Ofglen, who is her equal and has no power over her. Furthermore, Offred’s forbidden relationship with Nick and the supposed pregnancy that results from it is what, in the end, makes her accept her place in Gilead – she admits that she would rather keep her oppressive role as a Handmaid and see Nick on the side, then escape Gilead and losing him forever. That being said, Linda Kauffman (227) defends that Offred’s greatest transgression ends up being the act of telling and recording her story after she is taken away from Gilead, which makes her an epistolary heroine.



Interestingly, it is also quite evident that even the characters that would be expected to be true to their role in Gilead, such as the Commander and his wife Serena, prove to be prone to dissident behaviour – he has secret meetings with Offred and she bribes the Handmaid into trying to get pregnant with Nick’s child. This happens because, in the end, no one is truly free in Gilead and even those in power must perform in a way that is deemed satisfactory to those with whom they share a social role, as they do not want to be deemed undeserving of their positions. There is a general unhappiness in Gilead, every single person seems to just be “stuck” in a society that a certain thing of them and gives them no space for freewill (A. Nakamura 9). Proof of this is the fact that even though the Commander genuinely believes Gilead is an improvement to what life was like before, he admits that it is not a perfect situation and it is impossible to make everyone happy in a society such as the one they built – “Better never means better for everyone . . . It always means worse, for some” (325). This means that he does not believe that Gilead qualifies as a utopia, something which only confirms Margaret Atwood’s argument that there are no true utopias and every attempt at a perfect society ends up being an “ustopia” – a combination of both utopian and dystopian factors which are inherently intertwined.

In the end, only a rare few are truly committed to their role in Gilead and, consequently, nobody truly wins. On the one hand, the true believers lose because they live surrounded by people who are cynical about their performances and, therefore, inclined to betray and act against the regime. On the other hand, for all their dissident behaviour, subversive actions and forbidden “team-performances”, all those who try to undermine Gilead’s oppressive rules end up suffering the consequences of that defiance, especially the women. Having said that, it seems that Offred is the only one who truly manages to succeed against Gilead. Considering what has been aforementioned about Offred’s passiveness, this is undoubtedly an ironic turn of events, since she

does not truly seek to escape her situation and simply puts her fate in Nick's hands when he tells her to trust him. Furthermore, the irony of this situation is even more visible in light of what happens to the women who do, in earnest, try everything to escape and put an end to the oppressive patriarchy – Moira ends up as a prostitute at Jezebel's; Ofglen commits suicide to protect Mayday; Offred's mother is sent to the Colonies to die. As Fredrik Pattersson concludes:

*The Handmaid's Tale* is, in fact, a rather tragic story where no woman is successful. Offred's mother ends up in the colonies, Moira is in a brothel, Serena Joy as a miserable housewife, and Ofglen ends up killing herself. Ironically, Offred, the character who tried the least to affect her situation, is the most successful as she manages to escape and tell her story (28).

Although the ending of Offred's narration does not make it absolutely clear whether she is right to trust Nick or not, proof that Offred survives and does, verifiably, escape Gilead is the existence of the tapes containing her story, which she recorded post-escape. In fact, the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, which happens in 2195, represents the utopian part of Atwood's "ustopia", as it means that Gilead was eventually defeated and put to an end – this ends up being the most uplifting part of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as it is meant to demonstrate that although society can fall for bad political decisions which lead to places such as Gilead, there is always hope for a better future. Nevertheless, this Symposium also works as a satire for the times that come after Gilead and, consequently, for the reader's present times. Indeed, the discussion Margaret Atwood presents in the Historical Notes of *The Handmaid's Tale* is led by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, the man who transcribed Offred's voice recordings. Pieixoto is clearly a character meant to show how some things will never truly change, no matter what happens throughout History, some people

always seem to fall into prejudices, sexist ideologies and discrimination. Proof of this is the way the Professor manages to turn Offred's story into something which gives him credit, while at the same time discrediting Offred – he takes away the power from a woman who suffered at the hands of a patriarchal dictatorship and puts the spotlight on himself. It seems rather obvious that this is not an innocent decision on Atwood's part and the irony of having a man be credited for Offred's story is impossible to disregard. Curiously, Offred herself foretold this situation when she contemplates how History will not remember the nameless Handmaids of Gilead (352).

It is interesting to realise that the discussion Pieixoto initiates and maintains at the Symposium holds up a mirror to today's reality and reflects a lot of issues still relevant in the present. Besides taking credit for Offred's story, the Professor uses a misogynistic speech to devalue and degrade women. In fact, Pieixoto's speech can easily be paralleled to some of Donald Trump's slurs brought to light during his electoral campaign, such as the infamous 'grab them by the pussy' video uncovered by *The Washington Post* and the 'nasty woman' comment aimed at Hillary Clinton. This becomes quite interesting to look deeper into, especially considering how Margaret Atwood uses the Symposium as a strategy to demonstrate how society can move forward and evolve, but some things never truly change and the confirmation of this theory is how accurately Trump's sexist speech in current times mirrors Pieixoto's misogyny in 2195, which begs the question – Is society truly evolving? Clearly, Pieixoto did not learn what he needed to learn from Offred's story and it seems that current society is also forsaking the lessons of the past. As argued by DiBenedetto (96): "In this future nation, women have once again achieved 'equality,' . . . However, at a deeper level, Atwood seems to suggest that the 'equality' attained in this future society may be suspect, and furthermore, that we might do well to look more closely at what we term 'equality' in our own culture". Keeping that in mind, it is undeniable that Atwood's

novel is as relevant as it was back when it was originally published. This becomes even more accurate considering how the *zeitgeist* of the novel's publication seems to have repeated itself when the television series premiered. While no one could have predicted how similar the social and political scene in 2017 would be compared to how things were in 1984, the truth is that it created the perfect setting for a new take on *The Handmaid's Tale*, proving once again how timeless it is. Certainly, the unquestionable success of *Hulu's* adaptation of Atwood's novel was in some measure motivated by how frighteningly close to reality it felt at a moment in time where women's rights were a heated topic, mainly due to the politics promoted by the Trump administration and the waves caused by the #MeToo and the Time's Up movement, as an answer to the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment scandal. More than that, the timely appearance of the television version of Offred's story prompted a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, the global success of the television series and the consequential renewed interest in the novel were confirmed by the fact that the Handmaids' red robes became a symbol of female resistance and empowerment, especially when people started wearing it to protests, marches and rallies.<sup>10</sup> It is also important to mention the fact that most of the differences between the novel and the adaptation are intentionally made to make the story more resounding to spectators. By having the circumstances adapted to the current socio-political scenario, the goal is to make Offred's story be an unmistakable warning and, by making its characters a lot more rebellious, specifically Offred and Serena, it aims to inspire those who have fallen into commodity and passiveness. In addition, although Margaret

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<sup>10</sup> For example, protesters symbolically dressed as Handmaids were present at a protest against a restrictive abortion bill in Ohio in June 2017, just as it happened during the protests fighting the lack of access to abortion providers in the Isle of Man in July 2017 (Armstrong). More recently, the red robes manifested themselves at Judge Brett Kavanaugh's audience in September 2018, after he was accused of sexual assault.

Atwood has always been reticent to designate her novel as a feminist piece of literature, there is no denying that the series is, without question, an intentionally strong message to women, especially as it continuously reinforces the idea of unity among the Handmaids who, by the end of the season, prove to be a united front against Gilead. As Offred says through voice-over: “It’s their own fault. They should have never given us uniforms if they didn’t want us to be an army” (Season 1, “Night” 00:06:06-00:06:13).

Furthermore, it has become unquestionable that *The Handmaid’s Tale* has established a literary genre of its own, serving as a paradigm to every female-led dystopia that appeared after it. The truth of this statement can be verified by the wave of recently published female dystopias, which started to appear in greater numbers particularly after Donald Trump’s rise to the presidency of the US. Obviously, the social, economic and political situation of the world has always been and will continue to be a major influence to literature; that being said, the conservative politics defended and put into action by Trump, especially those related to women and their bodies, were shocking enough to inspire a surge of feminist dystopian literature. To illustrate this argument, it is relevant to consider books such as Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2017), Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks* (2018), Christina Dalcher’s *Vox* (2018) and Sophie Mackintosh’s *The Water Cure* (2019), all of them dystopias with female leads and strong feminist connotations which follow the guidelines set by *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Evidently, the difference is that, although Atwood’s Gilead still feels dreadfully current and plausible, the most recent additions to this dystopian genre have the leverage of being more accurately updated on what is going on presently. This means that these novels are able to resonate on a deeper level with the readers because they approach and satirize current issues in a way that frightens the audience by how close it feels to reality and/or what reality might become. Just like *The Handmaid’s Tale* was meant as an ominous warning

concerning the aftermath of the regression to ultraconservative politics in the US brought by Ronald Reagan's presidency, these recent dystopias are inspired by the most shockingly retrograde ideologies defended by Donald Trump's presidency, taking them to their extreme with the purpose of making people realise the consequences that might come from them, especially if the world just stands by and lets it happen without putting up a fight.

A good example of how realistic and (perceived as) prophetic these novels can be is found in Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, which can be considered a timely follow-up to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – set in the US, in a nearby future, it describes the lives of five very different women who, in their own terms, deal with the pressures of being a woman and performing their social roles in a country where Planned Parenthood has lost all funding, abortions are illegal after *Roe v. Wade* is cancelled, and only heteronormative married couples can adopt children. Although this book was published in 2018 and, therefore, most likely written even before that, somehow it disturbingly manages to reflect with accuracy what transpired in the US on May 2019, when several states, such as Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, and Louisiana, pushed forward bills concerning abortion bans.<sup>11</sup> Reading *Red Clocks* feels ominously similar to reading the daily newspaper and dystopian fiction reads more and more like contemporary reality, or a fictional commentary on it. It is due to this prophetic aspect of dystopias that such novels are often considered, by readers, bad omens to future societies, but truly it all comes down to the fact that the authors are able to speculate how reality might adapt to certain social changes and how those changes will affect the world. Arguably, these conjectures become fairly easy to predict when the

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<sup>11</sup> In Alabama, all abortions are to be considered illegal, including cases of rape or incest, unless the mother's life is in danger or the fetus is not viable; while Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri and Louisiana proposed a bill that forbids abortions after the fetus's heartbeat has been discovered.

political and social situation seem to be returning to old patterns, which have already occurred and scarred History – all authors need to do is pay close attention to reality and recognize the pattern. As Churchill famously warned: “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it”,<sup>12</sup> which is exactly what seems to be happening presently, especially considering how the world, in general, appears to be slowly and alarmingly returning to ultraconservative and far-right politics.

It is interesting to come to the conclusion that Goffman’s Dramaturgy is a theory that can actually be applied to a novel just as much as it can be applied to real life. Obviously, there are a few particularities to the application of this interactional theory to Atwood’s novel, since Gilead is a dictatorship that controls the characters’ behaviour to the extreme and, therefore, the consequences of any performative failures are distinctly dangerous. However, Goffman’s dramaturgical formulations can be applied to any type of society and the consequences of not committing to a social role and performing it exactly as society expects it to be performed are always quite severe, whether it is under a democracy or an authoritarian regime. Going back to what was been said about *Red Clocks*, it serves again as an example of how a society that is not under a dictatorship is also susceptible to coercing people into pretending to enjoy their role in society, even when that is not the case. This means that even in a democracy, individuals are forced to act and pretend to be committed to something most of them are not happy to commit to, just for the sake of fitting into society. Proof of this can be found in how worried people are about political correctness nowadays – people are terrified of being caught acting in a way or saying something which is not accepted by the vast majority, which means that they will say and do things just for

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<sup>12</sup> The original quote belongs to George Santayana and is written in his work *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (1905-1906). Nevertheless, it was Winston Churchill who made the expression famous when he paraphrased it and changed it slightly during a speech in 1948 to the House of Commons.

show while not truly believing in the reasoning behind their actions, especially when it comes to controversial themes. Moreover, even in a democratic society, most people are afraid to go against what is expected of them in front of an audience whose reaction to their performance could come to have consequences – this means that that are those with power and those who seek to please those with power, something which is particularly applicable to the employment sector as people fear losing their jobs. Consequently, it can be argued that Gilead's system of separating the powerful from the powerless is not so distant from modern democratic societies – the bosses are the powerful and those seeking fair employment are the powerless; the only difference is the fact that, unlike Gilead, there is a chance that the powerless might work their way up into becoming powerful. In the end, every society, whether real or fictional, is made of a group of actors who perform their roles as best as they can in order to avoid becoming a pariah and/or suffering the consequences of failing to behave exactly within what their audience expects from the role one is associated with.

*The Handmaid's Tale* proves to be a perfect 'plot' to be analysed through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. This is especially true considering how much is depending on the characters' behaviour, including their lives. To survive in Gilead, roles must be performed how the audience and, in this case, those in power expect them to be performed. Nevertheless, Atwood's "ustopia" shows that performances need only to be convincing, even when there is no real commitment on the performers part and that, sometimes, it is better to pretend to be dedicated to a role and subvert it covertly, than to openly rebel against it. Indeed, Offred survives because she acts how it is expected of her just enough to convince those in power, instead of blatantly showing rebellious behaviour like Moira and her mother, who end up defeated in one way or another by Gilead. Unlike what is usually discussed among scholars, the question here is not whether Offred's



passive rebellion makes her a questionable heroine or not, but rather to realise that, through the “presence of mind” she maintains during her performance, she does manage to survive when so many others do not. This mirrors today’s reality, where people must act how they are expected to act and anyone who dares to go against what is expected of him is, most of the time, made a pariah. Once again, this proves *The Handmaid’s Tale* timeless not only on the subject of female struggles but also when it comes to socio-political pressures. That being said, Atwood’s novel continues to be a valid warning for current and future generations, as it keeps feeling more eerily plausible to come true, especially in a time where everyone is under constant scrutiny and, consequently, constantly performing for an audience, even when that audience is not visible. This is why the television adaptation is so important as well, as it brought a much-needed renewed sense of dread to those who do not realise the path society is taking – in whatever format, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a wake-up call and it begs to be heeded. In the words of Margaret Atwood: “If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse” (*Second Words*, 333).

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